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STALIN AND THE KOREAN WAR

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The Korean War was a pivotal event in the evolution of the Cold War. In June 1950 hostilities erupted when North Korean troops crossed the thirty-eighth parallel, the 'temporary' line dividing North and South Korea that had been selected by the Americans and the Soviets at the end of the Second World War. In 1945, the Soviets and Americans had occupied the northern and southern zones and had arranged for the surrender and repatriation of Japanese troops. Moscow and Washington then established regimes that suited their own interests and reflected their respective ideological inclinations. In 1948, the Soviets ended their occupation, leaving Kim Il Sung in control of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north. The Americans withdrew their troops the following year, leaving Syngman Rhee in charge of the Republic of Korea in the south. Both men claimed authority over all of Korea, and both longed to reunite Korea.

Kim's invasion of the south precipitated a wider war. Unexpectedly, the Americans intervened. The United Nations voted to support the American effort to thwart aggression. After stopping the North Korean offensive, Washington decided in September 1950 to cross the thirty-eighth parallel and liberate the north. The Chinese Communists then intervened, driving the Americans back to the thirty-eighth parallel. Truman and his advisors carefully considered bombing China, but feared it might trigger global war with the Soviet Union if the Soviets honored their treaty commitments with the People's Republic of China. Rather than risk such a conflict, the Americans built up their overall military capabilities and strengthened their worldwide presence. During the Korean War, the United States transformed the North Atlantic Treaty into a viable Western alliance. The United States stationed troops permanently in Europe, rearmed Germany, and put NATO forces under the command of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Second World War hero who had not yet declared his intent to run for the presidency. During the Korean War, the United States also signed a peace treaty with Japan and got rights to keep troops and air bases in northeast Asia. In 1951, Greece and Turkey also were brought into the NATO alliance, providing the United States with an even stronger presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. At the end of the Korean War, the Soviet Union was in a far more inferior position militarily and strategically than before the war began. By then, Stalin was dead. But the ramifications of the Korean War would cast shadows across the globe throughout the Cold War and beyond.

For decades, scholars have argued about the causes of the Korean War. During the 1980s and early 1990s, scholars like Michael Hunt and Steven Levine (in the preceding chapter) argued that revolutionary nationalism and communism must be understood in terms of local conditions, indigenous circumstances, and regional history. Bruce Cumings, a scholar at the University of Chicago, wrote a massive and brilliant account of the origins of the Korean War, explaining that conflict in these terms. These scholars challenged the traditional view that the Korean War was orchestrated in Moscow as a test of American will and as part of a communist plan to gain world hegemony. Whether this new approach was adequate to explain the origins of the Korean War was, however, dependent on accessibility to documents in Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang, and Seoul that most historians did not expect to see for decades.*

Following the astonishing events that led to the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, scholars slowly began gaining access to primary documents, especially in Moscow and Beijing. In fact, some of the most fascinating and provocative new studies of international history during the Cold War focus on the beginnings of the Korean War. Kathryn Weathersby, an independent scholar, has been one of the leaders in exploring the new evidence, especially from Russian archival materials. In the selection that follows, excerpted from two of her essays, she revises yet again what we know about the origins of the Korean War. Notwithstanding indigenous circumstances and notwithstanding the powerful wills of Kim and Rhee, Weathersby argues that without Stalin's approval, Kim would not, indeed could not, have invaded the south.

Readers should ponder the meaning and significance of Weathersby's argument. What does she say about Stalin's motives? Was he acting defensively or offensively, or do such words have little meaning in terms of the conflicting crosscurrents in the international system? How important was ideology in the decisionmaking of Stalin and of Mao? How important was security? How important were the revolutionary culture and historical experiences linking Stalin, Mao, and Kim? American officials saw the North Korean invasion as a test case of American will, and responded by sending US forces to defend the south, and then to roll back Communist control of the north. How accurate was their understanding of the Korean situation and what was the impact of their actions?

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The new documentary evidence on the Korean War from the communist side illuminates many longstanding questions about the war and raises new ones, ranging from the causes of the war to the nature of the alliance on the communist side, the complex dynamics of the armistice negotiations, and the effect of the war on postwar Soviet, Chinese, and North Korean foreign relations.[1] This chapter will examine the central, long-contentious question of the cause of the outbreak of war in Korea.

* Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol. 1: *Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945–1947* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); vol. 2: *The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947–1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Since the early 1980s much of the debate over the Korean War has focused on the argument that the conflict was a civil war mistakenly viewed by the Western allies as a manifestation of the superpower struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union.[2] On most counts, the Russian documentary sources contradict the civil war thesis quite sharply. They reveal that the outbreak of full-scale fighting along the 38th parallel on June 25, 1950, was not simply an escalation of the border skirmishes that had been occurring along the 38th parallel since the summer of 1949, but was instead a conventional offensive campaign prepared by North Korea and the Soviet Union over a period of several months. Most importantly, though Kim Il Sung pressed Stalin for permission to attack South Korea, the decision to undertake the campaign to seize control over southern Korea was made by Joseph Stalin, not by the North Korean leadership.

It is important to emphasize that Russian archival records also reveal that it would have been completely impossible for the North Korean leadership to act alone on a matter of such seriousness. As the hundreds of files on Korea in the Central Committee and Foreign Ministry archives reveal in exhaustive detail, on matters of concern to Moscow, the Soviet Union maintained tight control over its client state in Korea.[3] The extent and nature of Soviet control over North Korea (officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK) was not noticeably altered by the withdrawal of Soviet troops in late 1948. The pattern of supervision in 1949 and 1950 was essentially the same as it had been during the occupation period. The files on Korea in the Soviet Foreign Ministry archive reveal that North Korea was heavily dependent on the Soviet Union for the material resources and expertise needed to construct the new socialist state. Due to Soviet occupation policy and the civil war in China, from 1945 to 1949 North Korea was cut off from its former economic ties with southern Korea, Japan, and Manchuria. Except for very limited trade with Hong Kong and two Manchurian ports, the Soviet Union was the only source of manufactured goods and raw materials not produced internally and the only market for North Korean goods. The DPRK also apparently did not have its own supplies of hard currency, and therefore could not conduct foreign trade on anything other than a barter basis. In 1949 when North Korean delegations attended a youth festival in Budapest, a peace conference in Paris, and a trade union congress in Milan, the DPRK had to appeal to the Soviet Union to provide the delegations with the necessary foreign currency.[4] Furthermore, to an unusual degree, North Korea was dependent on the Soviet Union for technical expertise.[5] Japanese colonial policy had permitted only a small number of Koreans to gain higher education or management experience, and the politics of the Soviet/American occupation prompted most northerners who possessed such skills to flee to the South. Because of these economic and demographic circumstances, the DPRK was much more fully subordinate to the Soviet Union than were the East European states that came under Soviet control.

The North Korean leadership was also subordinate to Moscow for political reasons. According to Soviet Ambassador T. F. Shtykov, Kim Il Sung stated in his final appeal for approval to attack South Korea that "he himself cannot begin an attack, because he is a communist, a disciplined person and for him the order of Comrade Stalin is law."[6] In Comintern circles Korean communists had long been infamous for their nationalism, factionalism, and general willfulness,[7] but the Korean communists who rose to power under the Soviet occupation had primary allegiance to the Soviet Communist Party, rather than to the Chinese party or to domestic leaders who had remained in Korea. Pyongyang's deference to Moscow was strengthened even further by the circumstances in which the North Korean communists found themselves. Like their rightist counterparts in South Korea, they had been placed in power by the occupation force controlling their half of Korea; they had not, like the Yugoslav or Chinese party, risen to power on their own. Although they seem to have faced little opposition from the population that remained in the North, they nonetheless faced the implacable hostility of the rightist government in Seoul that was backed by American money and expertise.

Furthermore, the North Korean communists were experienced only in guerrilla fighting and underground resistance. As they undertook the massive task of constructing a new socialist state, the only model to which they could turn was the Soviet Union.[8] Not only did they need assistance in running factories, railroads, banks, and so forth, but they also needed to learn how to organize their matters in a proper socialist way. Prior to 1950, the only place to learn socialist state-building was Moscow. The North Korean communists therefore had their own reasons for subordinating themselves to Moscow's superior knowledge and power. After Stalin's death and the weakening of Soviet prestige that followed Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign of the late fifties Kim Il Sung was able to develop a distinctly Korean ideology and to maintain a remarkable level of national autonomy within the communist world. In 1949 and 1950, however, his circumstances were sharply different. At the time of the outbreak of the Korean War, the Korean communists were in no position to act independently of Moscow.

To summarize, the role North Koreans played in the decision to launch a war against South Korea was to raise the issue. They presented the Soviet leader with the basic ingredients – an army and government willing and eager to seize control of South Korea – and pressed the option. The "civil war" interpretation is thus correct in emphasizing that the leadership of both North and South Korea fervently wished to end the division of their country and to extend their own authority over the other half.[9] Stalin did not devise this plan out of whole cloth and then order North Koreans to attack South Korea. However, while both Korean governments were willing to use military force to bring about reunification, neither was able to do so on its own. Because of the political, economic, and military dependence of both North and South, the decision to wage war for reunification lay not with the Koreans themselves but with their great-power patrons. The war came about because the

Soviet Union eventually approved the request of its Korean client while the United States did not.

Having established the relative roles of hegemon and small state in the outbreak of war in Korea, we must now turn to the question of why Stalin decided in early 1950 to allow North Korea to launch a military campaign against South Korea. The large collection of Korean War documents from the Presidential Archive in Moscow shed considerable light on this formerly obscure decision-making process.[10] Nonetheless, important questions remained unanswered. In particular, that collection provided no explanation of what constituted the "changed international situation" that, according to Stalin's explanation to Mao Zedong in May 1950, made it possible for the Soviet Union to support the Korean campaign.[11] Additional documents subsequently released from the Presidential Archive and quoted at length by Russian scholars Evgenii P. Bajanov and Natalia Bajanova[12] fill in some of the most important gaps, illuminating Stalin's reasoning in approving the attack and providing critical details about Soviet planning for the campaign.

Because Stalin assumed that Japan would rearm and again threaten the Soviet Far East, using Korea as its bridgehead to the Asian mainland, he regarded the political settlement for the former Japanese colony as an important issue for Soviet security. From 1945 onward, he closely monitored US policies in the southern half of the country for signs that the Americans might be reestablishing a Japanese presence in their zone. These preoccupations were similar to those he had in Europe, where he focused on the danger of renewed German militarism and assumed that the United States would act in concert with its former enemy to threaten the Soviet Union. What was distinctive in the case of Korea, however, was that the situation there presented Stalin with a more immediate danger of war. As a liberated country, Korea had not been subject to the demilitarization undertaken in former enemy states and its division into two occupation zones geographically polarized the sharp political divide within the country. By 1950 both of the governments that had been established on the peninsula, in the wake of the failure of the occupying powers to agree on the composition of a unified government, were discussing the possibility of ending the division of the country by subduing the other half. Given the security concerns of the former occupiers, now patrons of their respective client states, the intra-Korean struggle had the potential to drag the Soviet Union and the United States into direct conflict.

This danger was foremost in Stalin's mind when Kim Il Sung first requested permission to attack the South, during the March 1949 visit to Moscow of the first official delegation from the newly established Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The new sources reveal that Stalin turned down Kim's request on the grounds that the US would regard an attack on the South as a violation of its 1945 agreement with the USSR about the division of the country at the 38th parallel and would consequently be likely to

intervene. Moreover, the Soviet leader regarded the question as not yet topical since American troops were still in Korea and the DPRK's armed forces were not yet superior to those of the South. He did not object to the proposal in principle, however, nor did he seem surprised by it. Apparently sharing Kim's assumption that such an operation was necessary, he regarded the issue as one of waiting for favorable circumstances. Their conversation on the subject was recorded as follows:

> *Kim Il Sung:* Comrade Stalin, we believe that the situation makes it necessary and possible to liberate the whole country through military means. The reactionary forces of the South will never agree on a peaceful unification and will perpetuate the division of the country until they feel themselves strong enough to attack the North.
>
> Now is the best opportunity for us to take the initiative into our own hands. Our armed forces are stronger, and in addition we have the support of a powerful guerrilla movement in the South. The population of the South, which despises the pro-American regime, will certainly help us as well.
>
> *Stalin:* You should not advance to the South. First of all, the Korean People's Army does not have an overwhelming superiority over the troops of the South. Numerically, as I understand, you are even behind them. Second, there are still American troops in the South that will interfere in case of hostilities. Third, one should not forget that the agreement on the 38th parallel is in effect between the USSR and the United States. If the agreement is broken by our side, it is more of a reason to believe that Americans will interfere.
>
> *Kim Il Sung:* Does it mean that there is no chance to reunify Korea in the near future? Our people are very anxious to be together again to cast off the yoke of the reactionary regime and their American masters.
>
> *Stalin:* If the adversary has aggressive intentions, then sooner or later it will start the aggression. In response to the attack you will have a good opportunity to launch a counterattack. Then your move will be understood and supported by everyone.[13]

The question of favorable timing for an attack on the South soon became topical, however, as reports reached Moscow of South Korean forays into DPRK territory. Erroneously assuming that the South Korean actions reflected American intentions, Stalin reached the false conclusion that the imminent withdrawal of US forces from Korea was designed to free the Southerners to invade the North – perhaps mirroring his own rationale for withdrawing Soviet troops in late 1948. In April he instructed his ambassador in Pyongyang, Terentii F. Shtykov, to assess the accuracy of intelligence reports that the Americans would soon move their troops out of South Korea to nearby Japanese islands. "The purpose of the withdrawal," Stalin explained,

"is to give freedom of action to the South Korean Army. By that time the UN Commission will also leave Korea. In April–May the Southerners will concentrate their troops near the 38th parallel. In June the Southerners will start a sudden attack on the North in order to finish the total destruction of the Northern army by August."[14]

In reality, both patron and client in Seoul feared that the withdrawal of US forces would lead to the collapse of the newly established Republic of Korea, either through internal subversion or an attack from the North. It was this fear that led the US repeatedly to delay the withdrawal – from August to December 1948, then to March, May, and finally June 1949. Moreover, while individuals within the South Korean government hoped to provoke an incident with the North in order to force the US to leave its troops in Korea, Washington was determined to avoid such an entanglement. As General W.L. Roberts, commander of the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG), bluntly put it during the border fighting in August, "the South Koreans wish to invade the North. We tell them that if such [an invasion] occurs, all [US] advisers will pull out and the ECA [Economic Cooperation Administration] spigot will be turned off."[15] American determination to avoid becoming embroiled in the intra-Korean conflict was clear enough to the Koreans that, as US Ambassador in Seoul John Muccio reported, they "contemplated the withdrawal of the US task force with genuine fear – even jitteriness in certain circles. They moved heaven and earth to have withdrawal deferred."[16]

Despite having an extensive intelligence network in Seoul that would have known of the sharp divergence between American and South Korean intentions, Shtykov did nothing to correct his boss's misperceptions. In his report of May 2 the ambassador noted accurately that ROK forces were being expanded with US assistance and that the government of President Syngman Rhee was taking steps to increase the combat readiness of its army, but he failed entirely to note the disparity in aims between patron and client. Instead – perhaps out of an understandable impulse toward self-protection – he merely repeated Stalin's own conclusions, adding supporting detail.[17]

Shtykov repeated his exaggerated estimate of the danger of an invasion of the North in other reports to Moscow throughout the spring and summer of 1949,[18] further alarming the ever-suspicious Stalin. While the Soviet leader was determined to avoid being drawn into a conflict with the United States – apparently for fear he was not yet able to win it – he was also determined to retain the security buffer he had established against a future attack on the Soviet Union through Korea, goals that now appeared difficult to reconcile. His solution was to buy time by forestalling the intra-Korean conflict until a more favorable time to resolve it. He instructed Shtykov and Kim strictly to avoid provoking an assault from the South and ordered the dismantling of the Soviet naval base in Chongjin and the air force liaison offices in Pyongyang and Kanggye, in order "to demonstrate to the world our intentions, psychologically disarm the adversaries, and prevent our participation in the possible war against Southern aggression."[19]

After American forces withdrew from Korea in June and no invasion of the North ensued, Stalin was willing to consider a more forward strategy. In early September, after receiving a report that the South intended to occupy a portion of the Ongjin peninsula north of the 38th parallel, as well as to shell a cement plant in the northern city of Haeju, he decided to entertain Kim Il Sung's request to mount a limited campaign to pre-empt the Southern attack and improve the DPRK's defensive position. Kim's plan was to launch an operation to seize the Ongjin peninsula as well as some adjacent South Korean territory, approximately up to Kaesong, thus shortening the DPRK's line of defense.[20]

Stalin's decision to consider mounting this limited offensive followed a recommendation from Shtykov a week earlier that such action was militarily advisable.[21] The ambassador noted, however, that "the Southerners may have enough strength to counterattack, and then the fighting can take on a prolonged character." He recommended against a general offensive, citing four reasons:

1 At the present moment there are two states on the Korean peninsula, and South Korea has been recognized by the USA and other countries. In case of the beginning of military activities initiated by the North, Americans may interfere, not only by supplying the South with weapons and ammunition, but also by sending Japanese troops to its support.
2 An invasion of the South can be used by the USA for launching a wide hostile campaign against the USSR.
3 In the political sense an advance to the South can be supported by a majority of the population in both Korean states, but in a purely military sense the Korean People's Army (KPA) does not have as yet overwhelming superiority over the Southern army.
4 South Korea has already created a rather strong army and police.[22]

Stalin apparently accepted Shtykov's recommendation that an Ongjin campaign was worth considering, despite the inadvisability of a general offensive, for on September 11 he instructed the embassy to gather the information needed to make a decision. After receiving the subsequent report from Pyongyang, he decided against the campaign, on the grounds that "it is impossible to view this operation other than as the beginning of a war between North and South Korea, for which North Korea is not prepared either militarily or politically." Neither the DPRK's armed forces nor the partisan movement in the South was strong enough to ensure a quick victory, and a prolonged war would "create significant political and economic difficulties for North Korea" and give the Americans cause for interference.[23]

Earlier drafts of the Politburo resolution drawn up to implement Stalin's decision provide a fuller picture of the considerations that entered into it. In the pre-final draft, Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and Defense Minister Nikolai Bulganin set forth the arguments against an invasion in

greater detail. With regard to the political costs of military aggression, they wrote that "such an offensive initiated by the DPRK can be used by the reactionary circles to denounce the Northern government in the eyes of public opinion for aggressive intentions and a desire to drag the country into a civil war." Moreover, they presciently noted that "an advance to the South by the People's Army can give the Americans a pretext to raise this issue at the UN session, to blame the government of the DPRK for aggression and get the consent of the General Assembly for the introduction into South Korea of American troops. As to the introduction of American troops into the territory of South Korea, it can bring about a long-term occupation of the Southern part of the country and can consequently postpone unification."[24]

In an earlier draft, Gromyko and Bulganin stated more bluntly that "the Americans will certainly move their troops into South Korea, and you [Kim Il Sung] cannot stop this, you cannot even defeat the South Korean army." In accordance with Stalin's instruction to Kim in March that his troops could cross the 38th parallel only in case of an attack from the South, Gromyko and Bulganin concluded by acknowledging that "to be sure, you must always be ready, in case the South starts an offensive against the North, to defeat the Southern army and unite the country under the leadership of your government." Stalin toned down this wording to a less encouraging instruction that "in case the South starts an offensive against the North you must be ready and then act according to the situation."[25] Throughout the fall, Stalin continued to attempt to forestall the outbreak of full-scale war in Korea. In October he rebuked Shtykov for allowing the DPRK to attack ROK positions along the border. "Such provocations," he declared, "are very dangerous for our interests and can induce the adversary to launch a big war."[26]

The first collection of Presidential Archive documents established that in January 1950 Stalin decided that circumstances had become favorable for mounting an offensive in Korea. In response to yet another request from Kim Il Sung for permission to attack the South, on 30 January the Soviet leader informed Kim that he was "ready to help him in this matter" and that he would receive him in Moscow to discuss it.[27] He still regarded the operation as highly risky, however. The new sources reveal that he sent additional instructions to Shtykov two days later reflecting his concern over the dangers involved in such action. He ordered the ambassador to "explain to Comrade Kim Il Sung that at this point the question he wants to discuss with me must be completely confidential. It should not be shared with anyone even in the North Korean leadership, as well as with the Chinese comrades. This is dictated by the preoccupation with keeping the topic unknown to the adversary."[28]

On 30 March Kim Il Sung and Pak Hon-yong traveled to Moscow for discussions with Stalin, remaining there until 25 April. In the absence of any records of these meetings, until now we have only been able to speculate about what constituted the "changed international situation" that Stalin

believed made it possible to undertake the invasion and about why he insisted that the Koreans must secure Mao Zedong's approval before the operation could proceed. The new sources illuminate these two important questions, in a report prepared by the Central Committee's International Department summarizing the conversations Stalin had with Kim Il Sung and Pak Hon-yong during their April meetings. This summary deserves to be quoted in full:

> Comrade Stalin confirmed to Kim Il Sung that the international environment has sufficiently changed to permit a more active stance on the unification of Korea.
>
> Internationally, the Chinese Communist Party's victory over the Guomindang has improved the environment for actions in Korea. China is no longer busy with internal fighting and can devote its attention and energy to the assistance of Korea. If necessary, China has at its disposal troops which can be utilized in Korea without any harm to the other needs of China. The Chinese victory is also important psychologically. It has proved the strength of Asian revolutionaries, and shown the weakness of Asian reactionaries and their mentors in the West, in America. Americans left China and did not dare to challenge the new Chinese authorities militarily.
>
> Now that China has signed a treaty of alliance with the USSR, Americans will be even more hesitant to challenge the Communists in Asia. According to information coming from the United States, it is really so. The prevailing mood is not to interfere. Such a mood is reinforced by the fact that the USSR now has the atomic bomb and that our positions are solidified in Pyongyang.
>
> However, we have to weigh once again all the "pros" and "cons" of the liberation. First of all, will Americans interfere or not? Second, the liberation can be started only if the Chinese leadership endorses it.
>
> Kim Il Sung expressed his opinion that Americans won't interfere. Now that they know that the USSR and China are behind Korea and are able to help it, Americans will not risk a big war. As for Comrade Mao Zedong, he always supported our desire to liberate the whole country. Comrade Mao Zedong said on a number of occasions that after the Chinese revolution is completed, China will help us, if necessary, it will provide troops. However, we want to rely on our own forces to unify Korea. We believe that we can do it.
>
> Comrade Stalin emphasized that a thorough preparation for war was a must. First of all, armed forces have to be elevated to an upper level of preparedness. You have to form elite attack divisions as well as create additional units. Divisions have to have more weapons, more mechanized means of movement and combat. Your request in this respect will be fully satisfied.

Then a detailed plan of the offensive must be drawn. Basically it has to have three stages. 1. Troops are concentrated in the designated areas, close to the 38th parallel. 2. The highest bodies of power in North Korea make fresh proposals for peaceful unification. These will certainly be rejected by the other side. Then, after they are rejected, a counterattack must take place. I agree with your idea to engage the adversary in the Ongjin peninsula as it will help to disguise who initiated the combat activities. After you attack and the South counterattacks it would give you a chance to enlarge the front. The war should be quick and speedy. Southerners and Americans should not have time to come to their senses. They won't have time to put up a strong resistance and to mobilize international support.

Comrade Stalin added that Koreans should not count on direct Soviet participation in the war because the USSR had serious challenges elsewhere to cope with, especially in the West. He again urged Kim Il Sung to consult with Mao Zedong and mentioned that the Chinese leader had a good understanding of Oriental matters. Stalin repeated that the USSR was not ready to get involved in Korean affairs directly, especially if Americans did venture to send troops to Korea.

Kim Il Sung gave a more detailed analysis of why Americans would not interfere. The attack will be swift and the war will be won in three days; the guerilla movement in the South has grown stronger and a major uprising can be expected. Americans won't have time to prepare and by the time they come to their senses, all the Korean people will be enthusiastically supporting the new government.

Pak Hon-yong elaborated on the thesis of a strong guerilla movement in South Korea. He predicted that 200,000 party members will participate as leaders of the mass uprising.

It was agreed that the North Korean army would be fully mobilized by the summer of 1950 and by that time the Korean General Staff, with the assistance of Soviet advisers, will draw the concrete plan for the offensive.[29]

Nowhere has Stalin's reasoning about the war been expressed more clearly. The key factor continued to be whether the attack would prompt the United States to intervene and thus possibly drag the USSR into direct conflict with its far more powerful adversary. That the Americans had not used force to prevent a communist victory in China suggested to Stalin that they would not intervene to forestall a similar outcome in Korea, as did Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons. Most important, however, was the "information coming from the United States" indicating that "the prevailing mood is not to interfere." While we cannot be certain what information Stalin was referring to, the reference appears to have been to the strategic policy for the Far East adopted in late December 1949, titled NSC-48, which drew the US defense perimeter to the west of Japan and the Philippines, excluding the

Asian mainland. The timing of the adoption of this new policy suggests that knowledge of NSC-48, which Stalin was in a position to obtain through his British spy in Washington, Donald Mclean, convinced the Soviet leader that it was now possible to support a North Korean attack on South Korea. In mid-December he had refused Mao Zedong's request to conclude a treaty with the PRC to replace the 1945 treaty with Nationalist China, on the grounds that doing so would be a violation of the Yalta agreement and would therefore give the Americans a pretext for attempting to alter other aspects of that favorable treaty. On 6 January 1950, however, Stalin sent word to Mao that he was now ready to conclude a new treaty.[30] He also instructed the Japanese communist party to move to a forward strategy, and recognized Ho Chi Minh's government in Vietnam. The decision on Korea was thus part of a new forward policy for East Asia as a whole, designed to fill the vacuum left by the American retreat from the mainland.

Despite the new American strategic policy, Stalin nonetheless remained worried that military action on the Korean peninsula might prompt the US to intervene. He therefore made it clear to Kim Il Sung that the Soviet Union would under no circumstances send its troops to his assistance. If he needed reinforcements, he would have to rely on China to supply them. It was therefore only logical that he insist that Kim Il Sung travel to Beijing to secure Chinese approval before the campaign could begin.

The new sources indicate that Mao Zedong agreed to provide such assistance, despite some concerns about possible Japanese or American intervention. According to the report by Soviet ambassador to Beijing N.V. Roshchin, who was briefed by both the Chinese and the Koreans after Kim's discussions with Mao on 15 May, the Chinese leader approved the three-stage plan outlined by Stalin and recommended that the Koreans follow the strategy that had proved successful for the PLA. Mao argued that the KPA "must act swiftly, go around big cities not wasting time on their takeover, concentrating their efforts on destroying the armed forces of the adversary."

The Chinese leader nonetheless expressed his concern that Japanese troops might intervene in the conflict. Kim replied that this was "not very probable" but speculated that "the Americans might decide to send to Korea 20,000–30,000 Japanese soldiers." He added, however, befitting a proud veteran of the anti-Japanese guerilla struggle, that this prospect "could hardly change the situation in a serious way, because Koreans would be fighting in such a case even tougher."[31] Mao then warned his eager Korean ally that the presence of Japanese troops might prolong the war, and that it was, in any case, "not so much the Japanese, as the Americans themselves who could interfere in the war [*sic*]."[32] Kim deflected this implied criticism by repeating Stalin's judgment that the Americans do not show any inclination to engage themselves militarily in the Far East. They left China without fighting; the same approach can be expected in Korea.[33]

In the more encouraging version of the conversation that the Koreans recounted to Roshchin, "Mao Zedong said that the Japanese can hardly

interfere in the war now. And if Americans take part in the combat activities, then China will help North Korea with its troops. According to Mao Zedong, it is not convenient for the Soviet Union to participate in combat activities because it is tied by the agreement with America on the demarcation line along the 38th parallel. China is not tied by similar obligations and therefore can easily extend assistance to the North."[34]

Regardless of which account of these conversations is closest to the truth, it is important to keep in mind that Mao Zedong had little room to voice objections to the *fait accompli* presented by the Koreans. Having just concluded an alliance with the Soviet Union that was essential for the PRC's economic development and national security, Mao was not in a position to refuse to grant the assistance that Stalin counted on him to provide. As if to underscore the role he expected the Chinese to play in Korea, Stalin cabled Mao after he received Roshchin's reports that he approved of the proposed Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance to be concluded between China and North Korea. ". . .As soon as the big cause of the liberation and unification of Korea has been completed, the treaty should be signed. It will solidify the successes of the Korean comrades and prevent foreign interference in Korean affairs."[35]

Meanwhile, throughout the spring of 1950, signs multiplied indicating increasing American commitment to South Korea and to resisting communist expansion worldwide – NSC-68, a $100 million economic and military aid package for South Korea approved by Congress in March, and visits by high-ranking American officials to Seoul.[36] Nonetheless, despite Stalin's continued nervousness about the risks involved, preparations for the campaign against South Korea proceeded rapidly after Kim's and Pak's return from Beijing.[37]

The movement of KPA troops to their positions 10–15 kilometers from the 38th parallel began on June 12. Shtykov reported to Stalin the following day that "a special meeting was held for commanders of divisions, chiefs of staff and chiefs of artillery of the divisions and of the first echelon. At this meeting specific and concrete assignments were given to each formation. Special stress was put on keeping total secrecy of the preliminary arrangements. The adversary's intelligence must not learn anything through ground operations or from the air."[38]

The operational plan for the offensive was ready by 15 June. As Shtykov reported to Stalin the next day, the advance would start in the early morning of 25 June.

> At the first stage, formations and units of the KPA will begin action on the Ongjin peninsula like a local operation and then deliver the main strike along the western coast of Korea to the South. At the second stage, Seoul must be taken and the Han River put under control. At the same time, on the eastern front, North Korean troops will liberate the cities of Chunchon and Kangnung. As a result, the main forces of the South Korean army have to be encircled around

> Seoul and eliminated. The third stage, the final one, will be devoted to the liberation of the rest of Korea by destroying the remaining enemy forces and seizing major population centers and ports.[39]

As the invasion date drew near, Stalin continued to be concerned about the possibility of American intervention. Although he approved Shtykov's request on June 20 to allow the KPA to use Soviet ships – presumably from Vladivostok or Port Arthur – for amphibious landings, he refused to allow Soviet personnel on the ships "because it may give the adversary a pretext for interference by the USA."[40] At the same time, however, the Soviet leader made a decision that greatly increased the likelihood of such interference. On 21 June he received a report from Shtykov relaying Kim Il Sung's important message that the DPRK's radio broadcast interception and intelligence sources had reported that "the Southerners have learned the details of the forthcoming advance of the KPA. As a result, they are taking measures to strengthen the combat capacity of their troops. Defense lines are reinforced and additional units are concentrated in the Ongjin direction." As a result of these developments, Kim urged that the original plan of the offensive be modified. "Instead of a local operation at Ongjin peninsula as a prelude to the general offensive, Kim II Sung suggests an overall attack on 25 June along the whole front line."[41]

Stalin replied the same day that he agreed "with Kim Il Sung's idea for an immediate advance along the whole front line."[42] While this decision may have been sensible from a strictly military point of view, it reflected a disastrous misapprehension of how a World War II-style invasion across the South Korean border would be perceived in the West. Since Stalin had shared with his Western counterparts the trauma of a sudden, massive German attack, his failure to foresee the forebodings such an attack in Korea would immediately evoke in the minds of many of the world's political leaders is all the more striking.

The documentary record of the Korean War available thus far from the communist side reveals that this war, like most, was the result of the convergence of several circumstances, none of which was sufficient alone to bring about the war. Most fundamental was the strong desire of the North Korean leadership to mount a conventional military invasion of the South in order to reunify the country under their control, a desire echoed by the leadership in South Korea. Kim Il Sung and his close associates provided the impetus for the war, but whether or not their desire would be realized depended on the decision of Kim's patron in Moscow, and to a lesser extent his senior comrade in Beijing.

For Soviet leader Joseph Stalin the issue was not whether military action against South Korea was desirable; in his view installing a friendly government in Seoul would better protect the Soviet Union against the inevitable eventual attack from Japan. Instead, the decision hinged on his assessment

of whether South Korea could be taken without provoking war with the United States – a conflict Stalin knew the Soviet Union was not yet capable of winning. The second factor in Stalin's decision for war was whether China would assist North Korea, if necessary. By early January 1950 Stalin concluded on the basis of intelligence from Washington and the recent victory of the Chinese Communist Party that these two conditions were met. If his information had suggested otherwise, the documentary evidence indicates, the Soviet leader would not have approved the risky venture in Korea.

Notes

1 For detailed examinations of the Chinese role in the Korean War based on recently released documentary material from China see Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and Zhang Shu-Guang, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War 1950–1953* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995). Since 1991, the archives of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Soviet Union have gradually made a large portion of their holdings on Korea accessible to scholars. In addition, in 1995 the Presidential Archive (the Kremlin repository that holds documents of the greatest sensitivity) released 1,200 pages of high-level documents on the Korean War. For discussion of the new Russian sources see articles by this author in the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 5 (Spring 1995), and Issue 6/7 (Winter 1995/96).

2 For the most substantial argument that the war should be classified as a civil war, see Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945–1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), and *Origins of the Korea War II: The Roaring of the Cataract* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

3 See Kathryn Weathersby, "Soviet Aims in Korea and the Origins of the Korean War, 1945–1950: New Evidence from Russian Archives," *Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 8* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1993).

4 Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (AVPRF), Fond 0102, Opis 5, Delo 20, Papka 12, Listy 1–5; Delo 21, Listy 2, 4; and Delo 22, Listy 1. It seems likely that Soviet occupation authorities shipped to the Soviet Union any supply of hard currency found in North Korean banks or enterprises.

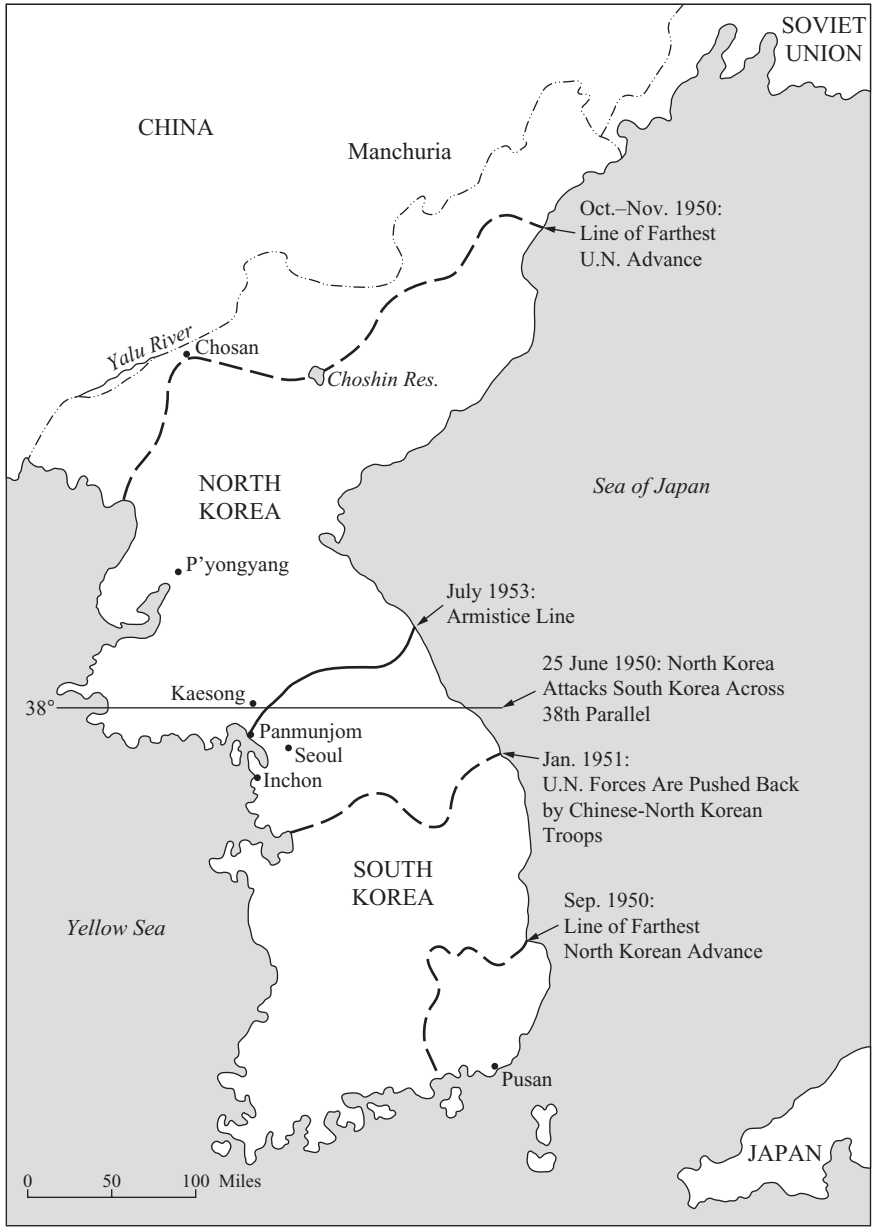
5 A major portion of the records on Korea in the Foreign Ministry archive in Moscow are requests from North Korea for assistance in training workers in virtually every branch of economic and cultural activity and Soviet arrangements for fulfilling these requests. The level of technological dependency of North Korea is one of the most significant ways in which DPRK relations with Moscow differed from Soviet relations with its satellite states in Eastern Europe.

6 Ciphered telegram from Ambassador T.F. Shtyhov to Foreign Minister Andrei Vyshinsky, January 19, 1950 (AVPRF, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, Listy 87–91).

7 The most influential criticism of the Korean communists came in an article published in *Revoliutsionnii vostok* (Revolutionary East) in 1931 by Otto Kuusinen, a member of the Comintern Executive Committee with a special interest in the Korean movement. Kuusinen excoriated the Koreans for ideological deviationism and factionalism. Dae-Sook Suh, ed., *Documents of Korean Communism, 1918–1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 257–282.

8 The Foreign Ministry and Central Committee archives include numerous records of visits to Soviet ministries by official delegations from the DPRK, who always brought with them long lists of practical questions about how to organize and manage schools, hospitals, youth organizations, industrial enterprises, parks, and so forth.
9 For an account of initiatives for war from the southern leadership, see Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol. 2.
10 The documents were obtained in 1995 by the Cold War International History Project in collaboration with the Korean Research Center of Columbia University and the Institute for Contemporary International Problems of the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Foreign Ministry. A substantial portion were translated and analyzed in *The Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 5 (Spring 1995) and Issue 6/7 (Winter 1995/96).
11 See exchange of telegrams between Stalin and Mao Zedong on 13–14 May 1950, published in *The Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 4 (Fall 1994), pp. 60–61.
12 Evgenii P. Bajanov and Natalia Bajanova, "The Korean Conflict, 1950–1953: The Most Mysterious War of the 20th Century," *Cold War International History Project Working Paper*, (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, forthcoming).
13 Conversation between Stalin and the governmental delegation of the DPRK headed by the Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of the DPRK Kim Il Sung, March 1949. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, "The Korean Conflict, 1950–1953".
14 Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 17 April 1949. Archive of the President of the Russian Federation (APRF), Perechen 3, List 25. Also found in the AVPRF, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Delo 4, Papka 11, List 80.
15 Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol. 2, p. 388.
16 Ibid., 379–384.
17 Report from Sytykov to Stalin, 2 May 1949, APRF, List III, pp. 41–44.
18 See Shtykov's cables on 28 May, 2 June, 18 June, 22 June, 13 July, cited in Bajanov and Bajanova.
19 Recommendations on Korea, 2 August 1949, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, p. 11.
20 Telegram from [Grigorii Ivanovich] Tunkin, [Chargé d'Affaires of the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang] to the Kremlin, 3 September 1949, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, pp. 18–19.
21 Memorandum of Conversation of Ambassador Shtykov with Kim Il Sung and Pak Hon-yong, 14 August 1949, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, p. 16. The recommendations were attached to memoranda of Shtykov's conversations with Kim Il Sung and Pak Hon-yong on 12 and 14 August during which the Koreans "again raised the issue of attacking the South, claiming that there was no choice but to solve the Korean issue through this method."
22 Report from Shtykov to Stalin, 27 August 1949, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, pp. 16–17.
23 See Kathryn Weathersby, "To Attack or Not to Attack?: Stalin, Kim Il Sung and the Prelude to War," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 5 (Spring 1995), pp. 1–9.
24 Draft Politburo decision dated 23 September, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, pp. 32–33.
25 Draft Politburo decision dated 21 September, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, pp. 32–33.
26 Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 30 October 1949, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, pp. 11–12.
27 Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, with message for Kim Il Sung, 30 January 1950, APRF. Also found in AVPRF, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, List 92. For the full text see *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 5 (Spring 1995), p. 9.

28 Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 2 February 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, p. 37.
29 Report on Kim Il Sung's visit to the USSR, March 30–April 25, 1950. Prepared by the International Department of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik), APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, pp. 40–42.
30 For records of Stalin's conversations with Mao Zedong about a new treaty, see "Stalin's Conversations with Chinese Leaders," *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issues 6–7 (Winter 1995/96), pp. 4–27.
31 Telegram from Roshchin to Stalin, 15 May 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, pp. 51–52.
32 Telegram from Roshchin to Stalin, 16 May 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, p. 52.
33 Telegram from Roshchin to Stalin, 2 May 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, p. 52. Bajanov notes that Zhou Enlai repeated a similar version of the discussion on American participation in the war in Korea during a meeting with the Soviet ambassador on 2 July 1950.
34 Telegram from Roshchin to Stalin, 16 May 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, pp. 52–53.
35 Telegram from Stalin to Roshchin, with message for Mao Zedong, 16 May 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, p. 53.
36 See Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol. 2, pp. 466–478.
37 Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin, 29 May 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, p. 57.
38 Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin, 13 June 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, p. 58.
39 Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin, 16 June 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, pp. 58–59.
40 Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 21 June 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, p. 60.
41 Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin, 21 June 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, pp. 59–60.
42 Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 21 June 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, p. 60.



Map 6 The Korean War, 1950–1953. Adapted from Richard Dean Burns, ed., *Guide to American Foreign Relations Since 1700* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 1983), p. 818.