



The Korean War Revisited

by Kathryn Weathersby

The end of the Cold War has not done much to reduce the long-simmering hostility between North and South Korea, but it has indirectly shed a great deal of light on the brutal war they fought nearly 50 years ago—and on the behavior of North Korea's leaders during the conflict-ridden years since.

As long as the Soviet Union existed, Moscow and its allies in the war effort, North Korea and China, maintained a

united front of secrecy about the conflict, closely adhering to their early declarations about its causes and origins. Over the years, historians learned much about the South Korean-United Nations side of the war, but some of the most basic questions about the conflict remained unanswerable. Now, with the post-Cold War opening of important archives in the former Soviet Union

Above: U.S. Marines in South Korea, 1951

and China, scholars are dramatically rewriting the history of the war.

When Soviet-made tanks led tens of thousands of North Korean soldiers across the 38th parallel early on the morning of Sunday, June 25, 1950, most Western observers swiftly concluded that this was not a border skirmish like those of the previous year but a full-scale offensive. North Korean president Kim Il Sung and his Soviet patrons, however, insisted that the attack was a defensive response to a military provocation by the South—the position North Korea and China maintain to this day. In Washington and elsewhere in the non-communist world, it also seemed clear that the attack had been planned in Moscow and that it signified a new Soviet aggressiveness. If the West did not resist, there would be similar attacks elsewhere along the Soviet Union's vast periphery, in Europe and perhaps the Near East. Within days of the attack, the United States and 15 other members of the United Nations committed their armed forces to a defense of South Korea, thus escalating the fraternal conflict on the peninsula into a major international war.

The Truman administration, assuming that Mao Zedong's new communist regime in Beijing had helped plan the attack, worried that it might also launch an invasion of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist stronghold on Taiwan. The U.S. Seventh Fleet was quickly dispatched to the Taiwan Straits, not only committing the United States indefinitely to the defense of Taiwan but helping to goad Beijing four months later into sending its ill-equipped army to rescue North Korea from certain defeat.

Historians began the first substantial revision of the war's history two decades after the 1953 armistice that ended it. Prompted

by the Vietnam War to reassess the U.S. role in the world, they began to question many of the assumptions the Truman administration made about the conflict in Korea. The most influential revisionist, Bruce Cumings, argued in his two-volume *Origins of the Korean War* (1981, 1990) that this war, like the one in Vietnam, had begun primarily as a civil conflict, with only marginal involvement by the Soviets. To the extent any great power had influence in Pyongyang, Cumings concluded, the Chinese played a more important role. He also suggested that the South Koreans themselves might have provoked the North Korean attack, possibly in collusion with the Chinese Nationalists on Taiwan, in order to ensure U.S. support for their tottering regime. The revisionists viewed America's intervention in Korea, like its involvement in Vietnam, as unjustified and counterproductive.

By the 1980s, most scholars writing on the war also agreed that by pursuing the retreating North Korean army across the 38th parallel after General Douglas MacArthur's stunning landing at Inchon on September 15, 1950, the Americans had needlessly provoked the Chinese into intervening. And in her careful examination of the armistice negotiations, *A Substitute for Victory* (1990), British historian Rosemary Foot also held the United States responsible for prolonging the war by dragging out the Panmunjom talks for two years—an argument many historians found persuasive.

The end of the Cold War has inaugurated a new round of historical inquiry and rethinking. The first major rupture in the wall of secrecy maintained by the communist side came in 1993. Two staff members of the post-Stalin era archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union presented a paper at a Wilson Center

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conference in Moscow that cited a 1966 survey of Soviet and Chinese involvement in the Korean War prepared by the Soviet Foreign Ministry. Intended as background information for a small group of Soviet officials engaged in negotiations with Beijing and Hanoi during the Vietnam War, this highly classified report baldly contradicted the Soviet position on the Korean War. It explained in straightforward language that Kim Il Sung had repeatedly pressed Joseph Stalin for permission to reunify Korea by military means long before the invasion was launched. Only in early 1950, after nearly a year of entreaties, did the Soviet leader finally approve the plan and send the necessary arms, equipment, and military advisers to North Korea. That May, Kim traveled to Beijing to secure the support of Mao Zedong.

Historians began getting a clearer picture of these high-level dealings in 1992 and '93 with Russia's gradual release of other files. They reveal North Korea's profound dependence on Soviet assistance in the prewar years and the extraordinary degree of control Moscow maintained over its Korean client state. But key questions remained unanswered. Then, in July 1994, Russian president Boris Yeltsin, hoping to improve relations with South Korea, presented President Kim Young Sam with a collection of documents from the Presidential Archive, the still-closed Kremlin repository that holds the Soviet records of greatest sensitivity. Early in 1995, the Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project obtained a larger set of documents from the same archive, many of which I translated and analyzed in the *Bulletin of the Cold War International History Project* (Spring 1995 and Winter 1995).

The new evidence shows that contemporary observers of the war were much closer to the mark about what was going on than the revisionists were—but that their understanding was still flawed in several important respects. There is now no doubt that

the original North Korean attack was a conventional military offensive planned and prepared by the Soviet Union. While Kim Il Sung had pressed Stalin for permission to reunify Korea by force, North Korea was not at that time capable of mounting such a campaign on its own.

Stalin did not, however, initiate the invasion of South Korea as a test of Western resolve. Indeed, he gave Kim the green light only because he believed the United States would not intervene—something the British spy Donald MacLean had surely communicated to Stalin well before Secretary of State Dean Acheson's infamous speech of January 12, 1950, indicating that the United States would not guarantee South Korea's security. Stalin was so determined to avoid a military confrontation with the United States, fearing that the Soviet Union was not yet strong enough to win, that he would not have approved the invasion if Washington had made it clear that it would respond with force. In May 1950, the Soviet dictator explained to Mao Zedong that it was now possible to agree to the North Koreans' proposal "in light of the changed international situation."

The archival record does not explicitly reveal what changes Stalin was referring to, but it appears that his decision was part of a new approach to security in the Far East adopted at the end of 1949. Moscow decided to abandon cooperation with the Americans and pursue its interests through more aggressive means. Stalin assumed that Japan would eventually rearm and threaten the Soviet Far East. He wanted to gain control over southern Korea in order to ensure that Japan could not again use the peninsula as a staging ground, as it had for invasions of the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and of China in the 1930s. The fateful decision to attack South Korea was thus part of a regional rather than global strategy, designed to take advantage of the new American policy of avoiding military engagements on the Asian mainland.

While the archives show that Stalin did not conceive of the Korea campaign as a means of gauging the West's will to fight, as many in the West assumed at



This was the scene when invading U.N. troops marched into the North Korean capital of Pyongyang on October 23, 1950. China soon intervened, sending the invaders into retreat.

the time, it was a test nevertheless. Since the Soviet leader based his foreign policy everywhere on calculations of American strength and commitment, he could not have failed to take into account a U.S. failure to come to South Korea's defense.

The various archives also show that the Truman administration was wrong to assume Chinese complicity in Stalin's decision to attack. The Russian papers, combined with documents from Beijing analyzed by the Chinese historian Chen Jian in *China's Road to the Korean War* (1994), reveal that while Stalin ordered Kim Il Sung to travel to Beijing in May 1950 to secure Mao Zedong's consent to the invasion, the visit was largely a formality. Having just concluded an alliance with the Soviet Union to secure essential aid for his new state, Mao was in no position to contest Stalin's decision. He would have preferred to defeat his Nationalist foes on Taiwan before risking

action on the Korean peninsula. Later, in October 1950, when Stalin pressured the Chinese to enter the war to save North Korea from imminent defeat, Mao complained bitterly about having been excluded from the initial planning for the operation.

Washington's mistaken assumption about China's role in the attack promoted the very action the United States wished to avoid. By challenging Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan, Washington led the leadership in Beijing eventually to conclude that despite the immense hardships an intervention in Korea would entail, Chinese pride and national security required standing up to American "arrogance." The sudden injection of more than two million Chinese "volunteers" in the autumn of 1950 saved the day for Kim Il Sung's communist state. The UN forces were quickly driven south before they

were able to regroup and counterattack. By the summer of 1951, the two sides had reached a stalemate that left them arrayed roughly along the 38th parallel.

One more important twist has emerged from the archives. Until the Russian documents were released, it was not known just how far Stalin was willing to go to avoid a direct military confrontation with the United States. The documents reveal that at the end of two weeks of hard bargaining in early October 1950, when it appeared that Beijing would not send its troops to North Korea to stop MacArthur's rapid advance, the Soviet leader ordered the North Korean army to evacuate the country and withdraw to Chinese and Soviet territory. He was not going to pit Soviet forces against the Americans.

Stalin rescinded his order as soon as he received word of Mao's final decision to intervene, but its impact on Kim Il Sung could not be so easily erased. Nor could the effects of Stalin's insistence that North Korea continue to meet its export quotas for minerals and other items to the Soviet Union during the war. The subsequent evolution of Kim Il Sung's aggressively xenophobic worldview was also shaped by Stalin's approach to the armistice negotiations. Once the war became a stalemate, in 1951, the Soviet leader instructed the Chinese and North Koreans to take a hard line in the negotiations, explaining that the United States had a greater need to reach a negotiated settlement. As long as the danger of an American advance toward the Soviet border could be avoided, Stalin apparently reasoned, the advantages the war brought the Soviet Union—keeping the American military bogged down in Asia while yielding valuable intelligence about its capabilities—outweighed the disadvantages. Even though the North Koreans, enduring heavy bombing by the U.S. Air Force, were willing in early 1952 to conclude an armistice, and the Chinese were likewise inclined by that fall, Stalin continued

until his death in March 1953 to insist on a hard line. As he explained to Chinese foreign minister Zhou Enlai, “the North Koreans have lost nothing, except for casualties that they suffered during the war.”

The Russian archives show that President Dwight D. Eisenhower's May 1953 threats to use nuclear weapons in Korea cannot be credited with bringing the communists to a negotiated settlement. Immediately after Stalin's death, his uncertain successors, concerned about the precariousness of their own rule (before Nikita Khrushchev's emergence), decided to bring the war to an end. When the armistice was signed, on July 27, 1953, more than 33,000 Americans and millions of North and South Korean soldiers and civilians lay dead.

Since the end of the Korean War, North Korea's leaders have made much of the devastation their country suffered at the hands of the South Korean and American “aggressors.” But North Korea also suffered at the hands of its closest allies. Indeed, the malign effects of Stalin's policies toward Pyongyang must be rated an important legacy of the war. The new information from the former Soviet archives suggests that Moscow's cynical, high-handed treatment taught Kim Il Sung and his associates that they could not count on their fraternal allies to ensure their survival. Even as Pyongyang grew heavily dependent on Soviet economic subsidies over the next several decades, it developed a progressively more extreme philosophy of self-reliance, or *juche*. When the Soviet Union finally collapsed, North Korea was left not only without an important source of support but without an understanding of normal relations with other states—or even an understanding that such relations can exist. That impossible legacy is an important reason why North Korea, nearly 50 years after the end of the Korean War, retains a prominent place near the top of American security concerns.

BACKGROUND BOOKS

Korea occupies a mountainous 600-mile-long peninsula at one of the crossroads of Asia. To the north and west looms China, a frequent antagonist. Only 120 miles to the east, across the Korea Strait, lies Japan, which more than once has seized upon Korea as a convenient bridge to the Asian mainland.

Although frequent invasions by foreign armies and ideas, from Taoism to capitalism, have been the fate of Korea, it early developed a distinctive character. According to legend, the first Korean was Tan-gun, born in 2333 B.C. out of the union of a bear and the son of a Korean god. For centuries, the early Koreans lived in relative isolation, shielded by mountain barriers.

The first (A.D. 662–935) of Korea's three dynasties was born when the kingdom of Silla enlisted Chinese aid in conquering two neighboring kingdoms, unifying much of what is now North and South Korea—then repulsing a takeover attempt by its erstwhile allies. When Silla fell victim to intrigue and rebellion, the Koryo dynasty (A.D. 935–1392) arose, gaining renown for its splendid court, its papermaking, and its mastery—long before Gutenberg—of moveable type. But internal decay and constant clashes with Japanese pirates and Mongol and Chinese invaders finally brought the Koryo down too, historian Andrew C. Nahm writes in his survey **Korea: Tradition & Transformation** (Hollym Int'l., 1988).

Yi Song-gye, founder of the Yi, or Choson, dynasty (1392–1910), moved the capital to what is now Seoul and inaugurated a series of ambitious reforms that still echo through the two Koreas. Yi and his successors curbed both the powerful local lords who had challenged the Koryo kings and the Buddhist monasteries that had come to pose their own challenge after the kings encouraged their development as a counterweight to the town-based aristocrats. The Japanese pirates were vanquished.

Yi established normal relations with China, paying handsome tributes to the Ming emperors. He also looked to China for inspiration; science, scholarship, and the arts flourished. But the greatest change

was wrought by Yi's embrace of Chinese neo-Confucianism, which he gave a strong local flavor. Martina Deuchler's **Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology** (Harvard Univ. Press, 1992) takes the era as its subject. Society was divided into five classes, dominated by the *yangban*, a small, hereditary scholar-gentry class. The *yangban* enjoyed a virtual monopoly on positions in the civil service, an important point of contrast with China, where an examination system allowed the less wellborn to move up. "The Yi monarchy shared with China the concept and rhetoric of the sage king," JaHyun Kim Haboush writes in **Heritage of Kings: One Man's Monarchy in the Confucian World** (Columbia Univ. Press, 1988), but not the notion of the leader's divinity. By claiming superior virtue and wisdom, the aristocrats of the bureaucracy could—and often did—vie with Korea's kings for power.

Yi Song-gye's reign was followed by nearly 200 years of peace. But during the 1590s, Korea was twice devastated by Japanese armies using the peninsula as an invasion route to China. Reacting to these shocks, and to the disquieting appearance of Western "barbarians," Korea withdrew from contact with the outside world, becoming the "Hermit Kingdom." One treatment of the period is **Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyonguon and the Late Choson Dynasty** (Univ. of Washington Press, 1998), by James B. Palais.

Korea became a pawn in the great regional struggles among the Western powers, Meiji Japan, Russia, and China, Korea's traditional but fading patron. In 1905, centuries of proud independence came to an end when Korea became a protectorate of Japan following the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War. In 1910, it was formally annexed.

Tokyo's rule was brutal. In 1919, nearly 8,000 Koreans died when the Japanese ruthlessly suppressed an independence movement (which had been partly inspired by President Woodrow Wilson's call for "self-determination of peoples"). The Japanese oversaw the forced modernization of Korea,

strengthening industry and agriculture (and largely depriving the *yangban* of their landholdings) but claiming virtually all of the benefits for themselves.

Among the notable studies of this period are **The Fall of the Hermit Kingdom** (Oceana Pubs., 1967), by Woonsang Choi; **The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895–1910** (Univ. of Calif. Press, 1995), by Peter Duus; and **Trade and Transformation in Korea, 1876–1945** (Westview, 1996), by Dennis L. McNamara.

Liberation from Japan after World War II did not end Korea's woes. Occupied by the United States and the Soviet Union, the peninsula was divided at the 38th parallel. By 1950, the two Koreas were at war, recounted in **The Korean War: An International History** (Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), by William Stueck.

The armistice of 1953 left the two Koreas devastated and still divided. Since the war, however, South Korea has transformed itself into an Asian Tiger, a story told in Bruce Cumings's **Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History** (Norton, 1997). The North's shroud of secrecy is seldom penetrated. For a glimpse, consult **The Tears of My Soul** (Morrow, 1993), a memoir by Kim Hun Hee, a North Korean agent who was captured after participating in the November 1987 bombing of Korean Air Lines flight 858, which killed 115 people. **The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History** (Addison-Wesley, 1997), by journalist Don Oberdorfer, dramatically recounts the relatively frequent high-level contacts (and savage conflicts) between the two. North-South dialogue began in 1971; a joint statement on July 4, 1972, declared that eventual reunification would be "achieved through independent efforts without being subject to external imposition or interference."

South Korea's evolution toward democracy is the subject of Frank B. Gibney's **Korea's Quiet Revolution: From Garrison State to Democracy** (Walker, 1993). From the beginning, the country's authoritarian leaders poured money into education—outlays reached 10 percent of gross national product—in order to produce the skilled workers needed to fulfill their strategy of

export-led growth. With education came democratic yearnings. Gibney says South Korea saw its first truly democratic presidential election in 1987.

But elections alone do not make a democracy. Jongryn Mo and Chung-in Moon, the editors of **Democracy and the Korean Economy** (Hoover Inst. Press, 1999), argue that South Korea's current economic crisis is a product of "the immaturity of Korean democracy." Efforts to reform the *chaebol*, the ingrown financial sector, and labor practices were caught in "10 years of policy gridlock." They say that South Korea is still far from mastering the arts of democracy—negotiation, compromise, and consensus.

Mark Clifford's **Troubled Tiger: Businessmen, Bureaucrats, and Generals in South Korea** (M.E. Sharpe, 1994) paints a more vivid picture: "Corruption, coercion and favoritism are the dark side of Korea, Inc. . . . Unlike Japan, the rise of Korea is a story not of consensus or harmony, but of bitter battles in the boardrooms and on the shop floor, in the heavily fortified presidential palace and the grimly utilitarian ministry offices."

Authoritarianism layered over Korean-style Confucianism—even a younger twin usually addresses the elder with an honorific—powered the South Korean economic miracle, Clifford says. But the formula won't work much longer. The government-dominated economy is too full of distortions and corruption, too closed against outsiders. The sudden jump from village-based Asian backwater to urbanized world economic power has left South Korea without the cultural resources to resolve conflicts that inevitably occur in a rapidly changing society.

"The tendency to hang on to what it knows best rather than to embrace change is more pronounced in Korea than in most other countries," Clifford writes. "Korea responds to shocks: It has reshaped itself largely under the pressure of Japanese colonization, the Korean War, and the single-minded military men who ran the country for three decades." That tendency to respond to shock stretches far back in Korean history. Whether it will assert itself again during today's economic crisis is a question still to be answered.

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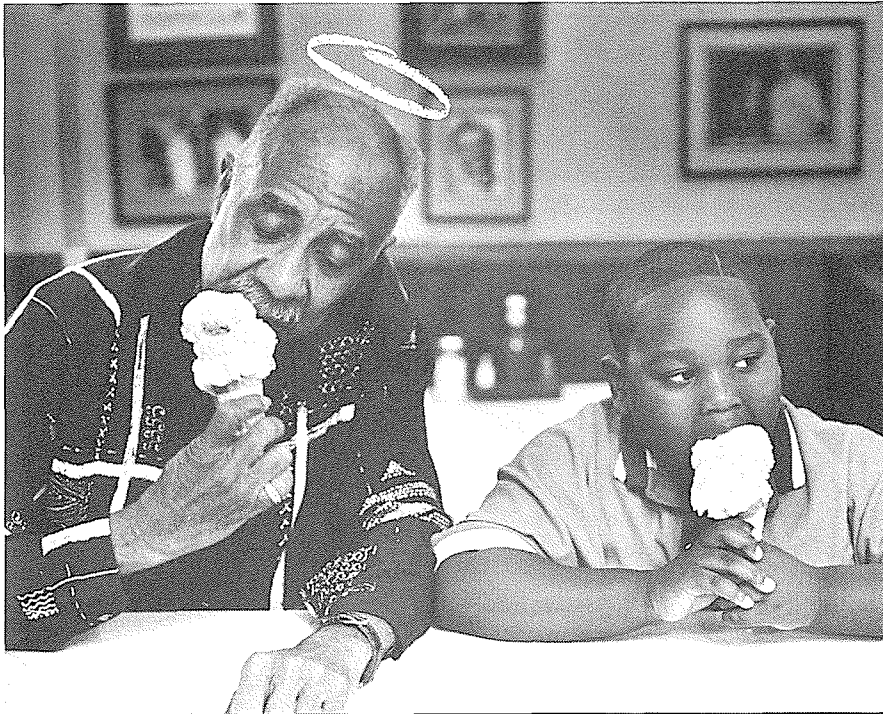
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