The Origins of the Korean war : Uanswered Questions

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By any reasonable standard of evidence, the question of who started the korean war has long been resolved. I. F. stone and the revisionist authors whd followed him may once have been justified in poking holes in official US and ROK accounts, but this has become an increasingly sterile exercise. In the spirit of glastnost, even Soviet historians are hinting, ever more broadly, that pyongyang struck first (and saying they plan to revisit the war on this, its 40th anniversary).

A problem common to many accouns of the war is their focus on the motives of statesmen and political leaders at at the expense of looking at the complexities of the sitluations they face. Even with a documentary record, "real motives"are often obscure and difficult to establish—and in the absence of such records (especially on the communist side), imputing hidden motives is bound to be an exercise in futility. As a research strategy, it is better to sidestep or "black bdx" the question of motive until the logic of the situation can be fully explored. Looked at in this way, North Korean policy before the war—far from being crazy or irrational—was closely keyed to the changing

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not reflect those of the US Government or the Department of State

situation on the peninsula ons, at least by pyongygyang's own yardstick, quite rational.

The war's international context has been exhaustively--if still not satisfactorily--analyzed, but scant attention has been paid to its regional and peninsular aspects. Over 100,000 persons were killed before June 1950 in an insurgency in the South and clashes along the 38th parallel. the way in which Stalin's

Policies in Manchuria and US moves to establish a base structure in Japan played into the North Korean attack also need to be explored. It is these aspects of the war, to paraphrase I. F. Stone, that are truly its hidden history.

There are several questions about the war that need to be answered.

—How was the outbreak of the war related to the southern guerrilla struggle?

The failure of the southern guerrille movement over the winter of 1949-1950 meant that to unify the country, on its own terms, the North had to resort to conventional military force. Most of the early guerrilla struggles were local outbursts, begun by lower level communist leaders in South Korea. The incidents were not part of a centrally coordinated strategy; they often threatened to upset Pyongyang's plans. The Cheju-do uprising in April 1948 nearly derailed an effort from a united from with southern leaders opposed to Rhee, and the rebellion of a ROK constabulary regiment at Yosu in October caught the North by surprise.

The DPRK's shift to support of an armed struggle in the South did not come until the spring of 1949, when the formation of the Democratic Front for the Unification of the Fatherland(DFUF) signalled the start of an all-out

guerrilla offensive. Large, well-equipped guerrilla bands, trained at a camp near the North Korean capital, infiltrated into the South to establish bases the rugged mountains along the the ROK's east coast. pyongyang said that the goal of the guerrillas was to smash the Rhee government and hold elections to unify the country by autumn. There was an all-out push—both on the military and propaganda fronts—in September, but the strategy of moving to large-scale mobile warfare and mounting attacks on towns failed. After the offensive collapsed, the southern guerrilla movement was thoroughly reorganized —with the apparent goal of bringing it under the direct control of Kim Il Sung.

Turning its attention to the guerrilla threat, the ROK began a major counterinsurgency campaign in early September. The government mobilized several task forces, relocated the nearby rural population, and after cordoning off the main guerrilla base areas, swept through them one by one. The government constantly rotated in fresh troops to maintain pressure on the guerrillas and run them to ground. the communist party structure in the South also began to crumble under successive waves of arrests; the engine of the party's demise was an organization of ex-communists the police ran as a massive informant network. During the winter of 1949-50, the govermnent succeeded in breaking the back of the southern guerrillas.

The North tried, but failed, to revive the insurgency by infiltrating large, well-equipped guerrilla units into the South. The exfiltration of the remnants of the east coast guerrillas in the spring of 1950 was a sign of the collapse of the insurgency. The North dispatched a large guerrilla force to cover their retreat, but most of this relief force was killed in a month of bitten fighting. In a signal that the DPR was distancing itself from the failed insurgency,

Radio Pyongyang stopped referring to the southern guerrillas as "partisans in the Kim Il Sung tradition." Its reports on their activities became much more sketchy. and it began airing misinformation—reporting nonexistant clashes and broadcasting biographic sketches of long-dead guerrilla leaders as if they were still active.

North Korean hopes of achieving unifcation by forging a united front with opponents of Rhee, by infiltrating the ROK security forces, and by supporting the southern guerrillas had been successively dashed. The only instrument Pyongyang had left to unify the country on its own terms was its armed forces —which far out loassed those of the south in training, equipment, and morale. the North was too realistic to expect a widespread popular uprising in the South, although this may well have been the picture it wished to convey to the Soviets in lobbying for their support.

—How were the border clashes that flared up along the 38th parallel tied to the outbreak of the war?.

The war was connected to the border clashes but obviously qualitatively different. The South initiated the initial clashes and usually got the better of it in engagements with the North;s border guards, but later—as significant quantities of Soviet military equipment began to arrive and Pyongyang committed its army to the fighting—the tide changed. The North mounted a concerted media campaign against South Korean "border provocaticns" and administered a series of stern object lessons to ROK forces along the parallel. The cumulative effect of the border clashes may have been to fix in the minds of the North Korean leadership the image of a long-term threat from the South. Rhee clearly wanted to march North, and would have done so if he saw a chance to do so successfully. This view of Rhee's intentions was shared by the US Embassy and Korean Military Advisory Group, which kept his

forces on a short leash.

The border clashes have been virtually ignored in most accounts. Clearly more than just sabre-rattling was involved. Many clashes were quite large, with attacks by regimental or larger units supported by artillery. The North Korean regime was able to play on the clashes to mobilize support and raise funds from the public to purchase Soviet weapons. Opposing forces often penetrated several miles into the other's territory. the North's attacks were designed to underscore political points and dislodge South Korean forces from salients they occupied on the northern side of the parallel. In one offensive, the North could have taken the entire Origin peninsula—but stopped short.

An Australian journalist who covered the war from the communist side, Wilfred Burchett, viewed the border clashes as serious enough to raise the question of when the war actually began. The war, he claimed, was not a transition from peace to war, but from a small war to a big one. According to Burchett, there was "a kind of war" along the parallel from the autumn of 1949.

According to my own still incomplete investigation, the war started in fact in August-September 1949 and not in June 1950. Repeated attacks were made along key sectors of the parallel throughout the summer of 1949, by Rhee's forces, aimed at securing jumping off positions for a full-scale invasion of the North. What happened later was that the North Koreans simply decided that things had gone far enough and that the next assault by Rhee's forces would be repulsed; that—having exhausted all possibilities of peaceful unification—those forces would be chased back and the South liberated.

The amazing thing about this statement is that it was published by pyongyang. Although I do not agree with Burchett completely, he is right in saying the border clashes lent a certain preemptive quality to the North Korean attack—and bolstered Kim's effort to obtain Stalin's go-ahead.

The border clashes have to be viewed along a time line. Many of the initial ones were started by the South as part of a campaign to keep the North off balance and to demonstrate the meed for US military aid after the last American combat troops withdrew in the spring of 1949. The clashes began with a "general consolidatiln of the parallel" by ROK forces as discussions opened with the US over troop withdrawal. Serious enagements followed at Origin, Kaesong, and Chunchon (where the commanders of two ROK battalions defected to the North in early May). Along with the border clashes, Rhee organized big "Give us arms!" demonstrations in seoul, started a lobbying effort in Washington, and threw his support behind a proposal for a Pacific Pact.

The North got the worse of it in the early skirmishes. One reason for this was that—like most communist countries—it garrisoned its border with lightly armed security forces, while holding its regular army in reserve. The head of the US Military Advisory Group, General Roberts, describid the border clashes as follows :

Each was in our opinion brought on by the presence of a small South Korean salient north of the parallel. Each was characterized by the CO's screaming "invasion, reinforce, ammo! 28... The South Koreans wish to invade the North. We tell them that if such occurs, all advisers will pull out and the ECA spigot will be turned off. In case they'd lost the Origin peninsula, they felt they'd have to invade to chorwon about twenty miles in, in order to save face .... Most incidents on the parallel are due to needling by opposing local forces. Both North and south are at fault. No attacks by the North have ever been in serious proportions.

It was not until mid-summer 1949 that pyongyang committed its regular army to the fray. The North was enraged by Rhee's vows to March North and by repeated ROK border incursions. The most Provocative if these attacks

trol mechanisms in those in those years were too strong for the North to have begun the war on its own, but this does not mean that Kim Il sung was just a creature of the Soviets.

In fact, there is good reason to believe that Kim lobbied Stalin for a year before he got the go-ahead to invade. Kim apparently first brought up the question of an attack when he visited Moscow in March 1949, before the border clashes had begun in earnest. Khrushchev says that Kim argued that an invasion would be a walkover, since revolutionary fervor in the South was so great that it would explode with only a bayonet prod across the parallel. (To underscore the point, shortly thereafter the North began dispatching armed guerrilla units into the South.) stalin supposedly avoided giving Kim a direct answer, but told him to got back to him after developing a more concrete plan.

Stalin apparently balked at giving Kim the green light to attack, but he did agree to supply some $40 million in arms (enough to equip six infantry divisions, three mechanized units, and an airforce of 150 planes.) The Soviets may have assumed that the US would proceed with a planned aid package for South Korea. As it happened, however, the Truman Administration decided it could not go before Congress with aid programs for Korea and for Greece and Turkdy : a Korean aid bill was not passed for another year. It was thes delay that created a temporay military imbalance on the peninsula. Soviet arms deliveries were limited at first, not greatly exceeding the standard issue for the East European satellites, and the buildup of the North Korean forces was at least partially off set by the continuing presence of a small number of US combat troops in the south for half a year after the last Soviet forces had withdrawn.

The insurgency in the South and the border clasges along the 38th parallel probably aided Kim in making the case for an invasion to Stalin. The Soviets

may have been a ROK naval raid against Pyongyang's assembled West Coast fleet shortly before Liberation Day festivaties in August. The small South Korean flotilla sank four and captured one North Korean vessel, which Seoul later used for target practice off Inchon during a highly publicized visit by Rhee.

Pyongyang responded to the incidents by launching a campaign against the repeated ROK "innasions" of its territory. As the campaign unfolded over the next few weeks, the North staged a show trial for captured ROK guerrillas, put on an impressive display of its newly acquired soviet military hardware in a huge Liberation Day parade, and mounted offensives to dislodge southern forces from positions north of the parallel. The campaign took a new turn when Kim Il Sung called for mobilizing the whole society to support defense and set up an organization to raise money from the public to purchase arms. The campaign ended in mid-October with Foreign Minister Pak Hon Yong sending a copy of a report detailing the ROK's border violations to the UN, along with a warning that if the international body continued to ignore the DPRK and interfere on the peninsula, the Korean people would have to rely on their own means to unify the country.

Except for a brief flareup on Origin, the border remained relatively quiet after this until the outbreak of the war. South Korean commanders no longer started battles they could not win. In the end, Rhee's "policy of bluff" proved tragically self defeating. It wasted scarce resources and squandered American good will : it made it hard to distinguish whether the North Korean buildup was for offensive or defensive purposes : and it kept Rhee's government from focusing on its own economic and political problems.

—What was the DPRK's relationship to the Soviet Union? Could it have started the war on its own?

Kim Il Sung may have sold Stalin a bill of goods on the war. Soviet con-

were notoriously concerned about buffer states and the security of their borders. Nowhere else did they have a satellite with such unsettled borders.

Kim Il Sung may have exaggerated the revolutionary ferment in the South in order to obtain Stalin's approval for an attack. The leader of the southern faction, Pak Hon Yong, was purged after the war ostensibly for having submitted false reports that greatly exaggerated the revolutionary potential of the south. But Kim Il Sung was as responsible for these "false reports" as anyone in the North Korean leadership, and may have been trying to lay the blame for his own sins on Park after the of the attack. the reason the North launchid large-scale guerrilla offensives in June and September of 1949 may have been to convince the Soviets that, just as in China, the southern insugency had moved beyond guerrilla warfare to large-scale operations by regular forces, the final phase in a classic guerrilla insurgency. Radio Pyongyang's exaggerated reports on the activites of the guerrillas early in 1950 may also have been intended primarily for Moscow's benefit.

—What role did factionalism play in the origins of the war?

Factionalism within the North Korean leadership was no more than a minor factor in the origins of the war. It set a floor on discussions of policy towards the South. No one could afford to appear to be soft on Rhee. At the most factionalism may have biased North Korean policy in favor of a more active policy towards Seoul. Nevertheless, none of the factions had positions that were set in stone and none were inextricably committed to war with the South. Like North Korean policy as a whole, factional positions changed over time in response to the changing situation.

If North Korea was a puppet, then the strings of control were snarled. In addition to Kim's ex-guerrilla faction and a few hundred "Soviet-Koreans", there were also influential pro-Chinese, South Korean, and domestic North Korean factions. At the time, Kim Il Sung was more first-among-equals than

the unchallenged leader he later became, but even then he was calling most the shots on policy towards the South. Kim--who had considerable experience in such matters stemming from hes background as an anti-Japanese guerrilla leader--appears to have taken a more direct hand in running the southern insurgency after a sweeping reorganization of guerrilla operations following the collapse of the September 1949 offensive. Kim's rival, Pak Hon Yong, was in charge of the early guerrilla efforts, and the collapse of those efforts worked to Kim's advantage.

Some South Korean authors claim that the North supported only those guerrillas it had dispatched and not local, independently formed guerrilla groups. Likewise, the September 1949 guerrilla offensive is seen as a deliberate ploy by Pyongyang--meaning Kim Il Sung--to undercut the influence of the southern faction within the DPRK leadership. The North Koreans are said to have stood by while the South Korean guerrillas expended their strength in a hopeless struggle.

This Period renains one of the most puzzling--and troubling-- for a historian. We do not know whether the North gave the guerrilla insurgency its best shot, supporting the September offensive with several big infiltrations, only to come up short; or whether the offensive was designed to draw South Korean forces away from the parallel; or whether Kim was trying to convince Stalin of the feasibility of an invasion; or whether, having had his request to invade turned down by Stalin, Kim Il Sung decided to act with resources at his disposal--as presumably the guerrilas were. We also do not know how the guerrilla offensive fit in with the North's campaign against the South's border "Provocations," which was the focal point of Pyongyang's propaganda effort at the time.

There is no evidence to support Robert Simmons'view that the North "jumped the gun"on an invasion scheduled for later in the yeat because of

factional struggles within its leadership. The two North Korean unification proposals on the eve of the war were not, as he suggests, competing initiatives by the Pak Hon Yong and Kim Il Sung factions. Rather, as Harold Noble has noted, they were part of a "superb razzle series of deceptions" that succeeded in distracting the South from the final preparations for the attack. Pak had a lot to gain from southern "liberation"--linking up again with his base of support in the South. But so did Kim Il Sung, who, after all, was the commander of the North Korean military.

Far more important in the origins of the war than factionalism was Korean nationalism. Strong nationalist sentiment pervaded the political atmosphere in post-liberation Korea. Its Pull was stong enough, for example, even to draw many conservative southern politicians to a unification conference in Pyongyang in the spring of 1948. All political groups saw unification as paramount goal that brooded no delay

--How did China figure in the planning of the North Korean attack? Did Stalin use the war to try to force a recalcitrant Mao back into line?

It is unclear how directly the Chinese were involved in the North Korean attack, though they must have known of it in advance. The only publicly available source is Khrushchev's memoirs, in which he says that Mao approved the invasion plans. The published memoirs, however, are not the same as the transcript of what Khrushcehev actually said. The transcript is much more tentative—suggesting only that, in responding to a question from Stalin Mao approved "the essence" behind such an action.

When the war broke out, Mao's regime was preoccupied with its own problems of consolidating power and rebuilding a shattered society. The Chinese do not appear to have played a direct role in planning the North Korean attack. Beginning in late 1949, after their victory in their civil war, however,

the Chinese repatriated tens of thousands (several divisions) of seasoned Korean veterans who had seen action with Mao's forces in China. Through a liaison office established by the Manchurian people's authorities in Pyongyang a few years earlier they also had a sizable diplomatic presence in the North. They would have had to be blind not to notice the Soviet weaponry pouring across Manchuria into the DPRK.

Stalin's most immediate problem on the eve of the war was how to tame Mao. The two had long had a troubled relationship. Time and again, Stalin's insistence on guiding the Chinese revolution from afar had resulted in disaster. Spurning stalin's advice in favor of a rural-based strategy, Mao had fought his way to power after more than a decade of dogged resistance to Japan and civil war. Moscow continued to recognize Chiang Kai Shek's governmnt—and wring concessions from it—untill the very end. With Mao's victory, Stalin had to completely rethink his "weak china" policy.

Manchuria was a sore point in Sino-Soviet relations. Moscow had long coveted Manchuria and stalin sought to establish a paramant positiom of influence there through Kao Kang, a vice-chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and head of the semi-autonomous northeastern people's regional government. Pursuing what amounted to an independent foreign policy, Kao had visited Moscow in June 1949—a few months after Kim Il Sung—to sign a package of trade and economic cooperation agreements that gave Stalin a sphere of influence in Manchuria.

Mao apparently complained about Soviet penetration of Manchuria in his talks with Stalin early 1950, recalling later that it was only by sheer persistence that he was able "to take the meat(Manchuria)out of the tiger's mouth." Kao seems to have been taken down a peg or two after the signing in February of a treaty of friendship and alliance between the two countries, but bounced back after the out break of the war. Kal was said to have

"facilitated" the dispatch of the Chinese People's Volunteers and set about organizing Manchuria as a logistical base for the war effort. The PRC's intervention is usually interpreted as a move to preserve a buffer to protect Manchuria, but Mineo Nakajima speculates that Mao may intervened to deny the Soviets a pretext to reoccupy the province to "it from MacArthur"s advance.

In any case, Kao was purged immediately after the war in what Mao later termed a "political earthquade registering eight on the ten-point Richter scale." (It was in investigating this episode that Deng Xiaoping first mark.) The principal charge against Kao was that he had tried to make Manchuria into an "independent kingdom." Kao's purge coincided with those of other pro -Soviet figures in China and North Korea.

There is some reason to believe, then, that Stalin may have been playing a deeper game than he has heen given credit for in Korea. The transcript of Khrushchev's tapes suggests that Stalin hoped for some response by Washington to the attack. Apart from getting the US bogged down in Korea, the only conceivable reason for his wanting American intervention would have been to create hostility between Washington and Beijing so that Mao would have no choice but to continue to "lean to one side."

—How did the Soviets and the North Koreans assess US policy on the eve of the war?

Despite the popular notion that Secretary of State Dean Acheson's National Press Club excluding Korea from the US defense perimeter in East Asia gave the go-agead for the North Korean attack, the flow of American power back into the region on the eve of the war was far more important to Pyongyong and Moscow. Acheson's speech was a much more nuanced statement than is usually recognized. It acknowledge the importance of Asian nationalism, warned of a Soviet attempt to pry loose Manchuria from China,

and, stressed—accurately, as it turned out—that the US would defend Korea under the collective security arrangements of the United nations. By early 1950, Washington was moving towards a separate Japanese peace treaty and had begun to establish permanent military bases in Japan. The Truman Administration had recovered its equilibrium after what Walter LaFeber has called the "twin shocks" of 1949—the fall of China and the Soviet's test of their first atomic bomb.

Stalin certainly knew that the US was planning to open talks, without Russian participation, on a peace treaty with Japan. The coordinated propaganda campaign against the revival of Japanese militarism that Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang launched in the spring of 1950 was obviously not pointed at Japan but through Japan to the US.

Washington's moves apparently played into an onging debate within the Soviet leadership. The two sides were represented by Malendov—an advocate of "peaceful competition" with the West—who believed that the USSR no longer had to worry about capitalist encirclement and could concentrate on economic construction, and Suslov—an old-line Stalinist—who warned that the creation of NATO and US work on the hydrogen bomb meant that the West was trying to tip the scales in its favor and roll back communism, in Eastern Europe, the PRC, and North Korea. Stalin finlly came dowm on Suslov's side just before the war—in, of all things, an arcane journal article on linguistic change. Moscow saw Wasgington as readying a counteroffensive to roll back communism, not as in disorganized retreat.

In the end, however, it was the North Korean invasion that helped make Suslov's nightmares a reality. NSC-68 (a blueprint for mobilizing American resources for containment) had been drawn up but was still on Truman's desk when the North Koreans attacked. The invasion seemed to bear out the document's most dire predictions and spurred Washington into action.

—Did Rhee provoke the war to escape insurmountable intermal difficulties?

A canon of revisionist interpretations is that Rhee was on the ropes in the spring of 1950 and that he either let the war happen, provoked it by staging a border incident, or ordered a headlong retreat to force the US to become involved in the war. Although I would not necessarily put any of this past Rhee—or, for that matter, General Douglas MacArthur—there is little evidence to back up these theories, and much that argues against them.

It is almost impossible that the war began with an incident staged by the ROK along the parallel. An invasion of the scale that the DPRK launched repuired extensive preparations, and, if Burchett is correct, the North had already made up its mind to go to war. All it needed was Stalin's go-ahead. Pyongyang had never allowed itself to be drawn by Rhee's needling before, so why should it have done so in June 1950?

Rather than being on the verge of collapse, the Rhee government had begun to comsolidate its position by the spring of 1950. The economy was looking up, the southern guerrillas had been smashed, and tensions in US-ROK relations had been, at least temporarily, papered over. True, Rhee had suffered an electoral setback, but—as the purge of progrssive assenblymen the previous year on trumped-up charges showed—the aging South Korean leader had far from exhausted the coercive resources he could use to bring the new assembly to heel. There is no reason to think that he had to resort to war as his only way out, or—for that matter—that he was so confident of US support that he felt Washington would pull his chestnuts from the fire.

Some historians point the finger of blame at the US rather than Rhee for having sprung a trap on North Korea. Rhee was certainly capable of such a manuever, but it is doubtful American policymakers were. As it happens, surprise attacks nearly always give rise to this sort of historical debate.

Abraham Ben Zvi notes that the arguments fall into two categories. The more conspiratorial view emphasizes the "coherence, clarity, and consistency" of the "victim's" foreign policy. It insists that top policymakers are never really surprised but failed to sound warning in order to deliberately entice an attack. The other approach takes the cognative route, emphasizing missed signals, inattentiveness, and perceptual barriers to warnings. True, US intervention in Korea was a sharp reversal of previous policy, but such reversals are common in crises, when time is short, there is a high perception of threat, and decisions are bucked up to top leaders, who are not bound by precedent. The US was much more directly engaged in Korea than it had been in China. And even without a formal security commitment, US decisionmakers felt they had to respond to an attack that put American credibility at risk.

—"Was it an invasion or a war of national liberation?"

Some broader questions about the war"s meaning and significance also remain. There are any number of ways to frame them, but perhaps the title—not mine—of a Korean translation of my dissertation is best; "Was it an invasion or a war of national liberation?"

The North Koreans can never(as long as Kim Il Sung is alive) openly admit that they started the war. To do so would undercut the regime's heroic self-image—that it prevailed against the strongest power in the world—and open Pyongyang up to the charge of having unleashed a war that cost as many as a million and a half Korean lives. For the next few years, we can probably look forward to Pyongyang's annual celebration of the Month of Anti -US Struggle.

The North Koreans' recourse to legalisms about who struck first, however, suggests that they feel some guilt over having begun the war. They do make their own case with much conviction. Pyongyang has never published a detailed account of the first hours of the war, nor has it been willing to

engage in scholarly discussions on the war. Even in the DPRK's published war histories, a critical reader can discern oblique admissions that the North struck first. No one wants to humiliate Pyongyang or point the finger of blane at it for events 40 years ago, but the North Koreans should unencumber themselves of this historical baggage—especially if they want to byild trust with South Korea and move towards the shared goal of unification. (As we have seen, the South has some bahhahe of its own.)

The answer to the question that began this section—whether the war was an "invasion" or a "war of national liberation"—is simply that it was both. The North Koreans refer to it as the "Fatherland Liberation War." While there was a boundary that was forcibly crossed, it would have been hard to find any Korean in 1950 who recognized the division of the country as legitimate, much less accepted it as permanent. Given the means and opportunity, Syngman Rhee would have gone North, just as Kim came South—but he would not have blushed about he would not have blushed about admitting it.

Finally, there is the question of whether the Korean War was international or civil in character. And here the answer is also both. The balance changed over time. The initial division of Korea—as well as its liberation from Japan—was due to the US and USSR. Superpower disengagement and the subsequent creation of rival Korean regimes strengthened the civil aspect of the struggle between the Korean left and right. Later, as the Soviets now delicately put it, the war was "internationalized" by US and, later, Chinese interventions(Soviet intervention too was, we have recently been told, only narrowly averted.) Today, with the end of the Cold War, the civil character of the competition between the two Koreas is again assuming more importance.