Cold Relations of the Korean War:
Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, and Kim Il Sung

William Green
History 300kk: America’s Small Wars
April 17, 2015
Abstract:

This paper explains how the relationship between Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union, Mao Tse-tung of China, and Kim Il Sung of North Korea before and during the Korean War from 1950 to 1953 was “cold in the sense that it was based on personal agendas and the necessity of their relationship to complete those agendas and how it dictated their actions in relation to the Korean War. The background histories of these three nations are addressed first in order to explain some of the extent of their linking experiences before the Korean War. Some authors’ and historians’ interpretations of these three political leaders’ past histories, personal agendas, and some information on their relationship are paired with translated communications between the three leaders and analyzed to further the thesis on the extent of their relationship and the effects on their actions. This is paired with translated communications between the three leaders to further explain the extent of their relationship.
In the years after the end of World War II in 1945 there was a growing tension between the Capitalist United States and the Communist Soviet Union and its spheres of influence in a period that is commonly referred to as the Cold War. While this long conflict did not directly include one major war there were several wars spread out in several countries that were looked at as elements of this conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The first major war in this time period happened when Communist North Korea invaded South Korea in June of 1950. This war lasted from then until July of 1953 when an armistice was signed between all opposing forces. However, instead of focusing on the fighting this paper is focusing on the relationship between the Communist leaders involved in the conflict. The relationship of Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union, Mao Tse-tung of China, and Kim Il Sung of North Korea was based on personal agendas and the necessity of each other to complete those agendas led to a very “cold” relationship between them which dictated their actions in relation to the Korean War that took place from 1950 to 1953.

This conclusion has been made after examining authors’ and historians’ interpretations of previously restricted documents and communications between Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, and Kim Il Sung. Various books and academic articles serve as background information on the history of the Soviet Union, China, and Korea. The background histories of these three nations are addressed first in order to explain some of the extent of similar linking experiences before the Korean War. Other books and articles form authors’ and historians’ give good information about the three political leaders’ past histories, personal agendas, and some information on their relationship. Those books serve to help better describe each political leader provide more insight into their relationship. This is paired with translated communications between the three leaders to further explain the extent of their relationship.
To start with the histories of the three Communist nations the Soviet Union is addressed first. However, first the 1904 to 1905 Russo-Japanese between Russia and Japan must be addressed in order to establish a connection with the former Japanese Empire and Korea. This was mainly fought over rule of Korea for different similar and different reasons on both sides. Russia was mainly interested in Korea and Manchuria which were adjacent and would better their political and military position over China.\(^1\) Japan looked at the Korean peninsula in the same way in relation to China, but also as a form of defense against any foreign powers that may take over. This was mainly because Korea’s close proximity to Japan.\(^2\) This conflict ended in a Russian defeat the door being open for the Japanese Empire to Korea leading up to Korea’s annexation in 1910 by Japan.

Fast forward several years the Soviet Union was formed in 1922 with treaties between Russia, Byelorussia, Ukraine, and Transcaucasia with others as time went on, but for the purpose of this argument the history of the Soviet Union will start in 1971 with the October Revolution of the Bolshevik political party led by Vladimir Lenin.\(^3\) The October Revolution was an event in which the Bolshevik political party overthrew the government in the capital in Moscow, Russia. The Bolshevik party was a Social Democratic Party led by Vladimir Lenin who believed in a dictatorship of the working class and financial equality which became the basis for Communism. This is important to note because Joseph Stalin was a part of the Bolshevik and eventually took over as leader after Lenin’s death in 1924. The history of the Bolshevik political party includes a civil war between the opposing anti-Bolshevik party and brutal purges later on, one of which was

---


\(^2\) Westwood, *Russia against Japan, 1904-1905*, 2

led by Joseph Stalin to eradicate opposing regimes. These points of civil war within Russia and the Soviet Union mark even more similarities that will be identified later in this paper.

One more point in the history in the Soviet Union is its involvement in World War II from 1941 to 1945. The Soviet Union joined the Allied powers in fighting the Nazi German forces out of Russia to Berlin and the Japanese Empire in Mongolia and Manchuria. At the end of that war in 1945 the Soviet Union held a presence in North Korea after Korea was split at the 38th parallel as decided by the Allied Powers. However, a consequence of all of the fighting the Soviet Union took part in during World War II was devastating losses taken during that time. In the years after World War II leading up to the Korean War the Soviet Union was still suffering from those loses.

Next the Korean history starts around the time of the 1904 to 1905 Russo-Japanese War. This is important because this is Korea’s first interaction with Japan and is the onset of Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910 until their defeat at the end of World War II in 1945. The Japanese Empire maintained a large military presence and administration in Korea during that time that was very oppressive towards the Koreans and their culture. Korean newspapers published in the Korean language were prohibited and the Korean people were required to wear traditional Japanese style clothing that clashed with Korean cultural traditions.\(^4\) The Japanese Empire also had financial and production designs on Korea with most of the industrial facilities in northern Korea and the agricultural facilities focused in the south with much of the agricultural land ownership was taken from the native Korean people.\(^5\) This led to Korea’s poor economic


situations in the years after World War II in 1945 and leading up to the Korean War. This plays into Kim Il Sung’s goal of self sufficiency which will be addressed later.

Another point during Japanese rule of Korea is the March First Movement in 1919 which marked the beginning of several independence movements against the Japanese Empire. These other movements spread beyond Korea with Manchuria being the most important to note in this paper because it is where Kim Il Sung first interacted with the Soviet Union. This point further connects the Soviet influences after the split of Korea at the 38th parallel by Allied Powers at the end of World War II in 1945.

Chinese history also has a connection with the Japanese Empire upon its invasion of Manchuria in 1931 until the Japanese defeat at the end of World War II in 1945. China sustained heavy casualties from this fighting like the Soviet Union did during their time fighting in World War II. However, a year after World War II from 1946 to 1949 there was a Chinese civil war between the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang led by Mao Tse-tung and Chiang Kai-shek respectively for governance over China. The Chinese Communist Party, of course, was supported by the Soviet Union while the Kuomintang was supported by the United States and other Allied Powers. This marks the connection between the Soviet Union and China in order to understand why the two were in contact with each other during this time leading up to the Korean War.

Next the individual leaders can be examined for their characteristics and personal agendas starting with Joseph Stalin. Stalin was leader of the Bolshevik Party, more commonly

---

6 The March Movement was a peaceful movement in the form of a proclamation that was announced publicly on March 1st of 1919 in Seoul. The Japanese military police reacted by arresting the announcers and opening fire on the other protesters because the actions of the Koreans was deemed as rebellious (History of Korea (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 1969), 114-15).
referred to now as the Communist Party, which governed the Soviet Union. Within the Cold War train of thought Stalin viewed the Capitalist United States as an enemy. However, due to the effects of World War II still being felt and Stalin’s focus on developments in Europe with the United States he feared United States involvement in Korea. This explains his initial reservations towards Kim Il Sung’s plan to invade South Korea until the Sino-Soviet Treaty Alliance and Mutual Assistance that the Soviet Union signed with China in February of 1950, just three months before the invasion of South Korea. It was after that treaty that Stalin felt more confident in keeping the United States from escalating the conflict. This explains the July invasion of South Korea by North Korea. Stalin planned on using the China to aid North Korea rather than having to send his own forces citing his situation for World War II justify his reasoning to Moa Tse-tung.

Mao Tse-tung was leader of the Chinese Communist Party in the early 1920s and throughout the Chinese Civil War from 1946 to 1949 and later founded the People’s Republic of China at the end of that war. Mao was a communist as well as a nationalist concerned with furthering his revolution for his country. This involved the retaking of Taiwan which was lost to the Japanese in World War II and later by the Kuomintang who was occupying the island in the years after the end of the Chinese Civil War. Mao also was reluctant at first to aid North Korea as well because of that fact as well as China’s poor situation after just having fought a Civil War within the country.

However, reasons arose later for Mao’s decision to aid the North Korean People’s Army in October of 1950 merged after United States President, Harry S. Truman, announced that the

---


United States would aid South Korea on land from Inchon and by sea which included control of the Taiwanese Strait which prohibited Mao from finishing his revolution in China.\textsuperscript{9} United States intervention also led to Mao Tse-tung’s argument for national security. Mao was worried about Korea’s close proximity to China’s boarders as was seen when the Japanese occupied Korea in the early to mid 1900s. The Taiwanese Strait was also in close proximity to China’s southern boarders not to mention that some of the remnants of the Kuomintang were also in Taiwan at that time as mentioned earlier. Mao viewed the United States as an aggressive power, which is understandable because of the relations between the United States and China’s ally the Soviet Union. Mao even goes so far as to compare the United States to the likeness of a feeding tiger.\textsuperscript{10}

Mao Tse-tung also saw China as a more prime example or “role model” of Communism in the Asian sphere of influence. If Mao allowed Korea to be lost to the American Capitalists, then it could be conceived by the Soviet Union and other Asian nations fighting for independence that Mao failed as this “role model” was incapable of aiding anyone let alone defend his own country.\textsuperscript{11} However, if Mao was succeeded in aiding North Korean forces, it “would greatly strengthen the CCP’s authority and reputation as China’s rulers” and allow for China to become a competent beacon in the eyes of other nations in the Asian theatre.\textsuperscript{12} This train of thought is furthered by his willingness to send aid to North Vietnam in their


\textsuperscript{10}  Xiaobing Li, Allan R. Millett, and Bin Yu, eds., \textit{Mao’s Generals Remember Korea} (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 31.

\textsuperscript{11}  Michael Sheng, “Mao’s Role in the Korean Conflict: A Revision,” \textit{Twentieth-Century China} 39, no. 3 (October 2014): 282.

\textsuperscript{12}  Jian, \textit{China’s Road to the Korean War}, 129.
independence fight against France in 1950.\textsuperscript{13} Looking at these gives a rational background to Mao’s decision to send Chinese forces to North Korea to aid in the fight against South Korea, United States, and the United Nations’ forces in October of 1950.

Kim Il Sung was born in 1912 near the current North Korean Capital of Pyongyang. This is important because the year of his birth is two year after the Japanese Empire’s annexation of Korea. It was because of this that Kim’s parents fled to Manchuria in his early childhood to avoid the harsh Japanese rule of Korea. It was there that Kim was part of a Communist youth group in the late 1920s and later participated in resistance movements, as sparked by the March First Movement, and guerilla warfare against the Japanese Empire in the 1930s prior to World War II. The Soviet Union later trained him prior to fighting as a Soviet Army major in a Korean unit during World War II against the Japanese until the end in 1945. This explains Kim’s relationship with the Soviet Union and Joseph Stalin in relation to Kim being chosen as the premiere leader of North Korea in 1948 when he became the Prime Minister.\textsuperscript{14}

Kim Il Sung also had a nationalist philosophy that was later called “Juche” that officially formed in the late 1960s to early 1970s as part of the guiding principles of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. This ideology of Kim encompasses three main objectives: independence, self-reliance, and self-defense.\textsuperscript{15} Though this ideology is noted as being formed years after the Korean War by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea these ideals can be seen by Kim’s aspirations to unite Korea by invading South Korea. Uniting Korea would have


been the first step in strengthening the country to become more self-reliant and capable of self-defense. However, he knew that his country was not strong enough to do it alone if the United States and United Nations decided to aid South Korea hence his request for assistance from Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union. Kim did not specifically want to enlist the aid of China, but Stalin referred him to them. This also was his only option for direct military aid in terms of troops seeing that the Soviet Union never sent any troops to North Korea.

Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-tung’s relationship was particularly strained because of differing agendas. Stalin being focused his domestic problem in within the Soviet Union and developments in Europe with the United States and other nations paired with Mao’s focus on rebuilding China and continuing his revolution did not allow for a close relationship. Stalin did not even tell Mao about his recommendation to Kim Il Sung about Chinese aid in his invasion. There is even a telegram sent from Stalin to Mao on October 1st of 1950 asking for troops to be sent to Korea on the 38th parallel with promise of confidentiality in relation to Korea. However, later on October 8th 1950 Stalin sent a copy of the telegram to Kim Il Sung with a summary of Mao’s positive response the day before to sending troops sometime later. This is interesting because it marks a lack of honesty from Stalin to Mao in order for him keep the war going in his favor in Korea. Mao’s telegrams mainly consist of requests for training of Chinese men which were mainly pilots where trained with Soviet planes. Requests like this allowed Mao to get crucial training and aid needed to further his aspirations of keeping a sphere of influence in Asia by being a competent supplier of military aid via Stalin’s help.


The relationship between Joseph Stalin and Kim Il Sung was not as strained as Stalin’s relationship with Mao Tse-tung. This can be attributed to Kim’s close relationship with the Soviet Union in the time period around World War II and the fight with the Japanese mentioned earlier. The Soviet Union chose Kim over other Koreans who fought the Japanese in World War II with the Japanese which speaks volumes about some attitudes towards China. Stalin even sent Kim a telegram identifying Kim’s fight with his fight for governance of the Soviet Union encouraging him to fight on. This is interesting because of Stalin’s use of China to reinforce North Korea instead of sending his troops to Korea. This is also marked by Stalin’s plan to keep the United States focus in Asia while he focused in Europe. Kim relied on Stalin for training for his troops in Soviet aircraft within China, supplies such as ammunition and food, and military advice from the advisors that Stalin had sent earlier in the year of 1950. This is part of what kept North Korean forces going after they were pushed back in late 1950.

The relationship between Kim Il Sung and Mao Tse-tung was very minimal because of Kim’s reluctance to seek aid from Mao. This can especially be seen when Kim met with Mao in May of 1950 and expressed his confidence in the invasion succeeding without the need for Chinese intervention. This fits Kim’s “Juche” mentality for self-sufficiency as mentioned before and allows for a better definition of their distant relationship. However after the invasion hit major setbacks with the intervention by the United States and United Nations correspondences can be seen from Kim to Mao asking for approval on strategies and requests to construct factories in China among other similar requests. This shows a change in Kim’s thinking that allowed him to use Mao to complete his war with the South Korean army for

19 Callum MacDonald, Korea, 11.
reunification of Korea.\textsuperscript{22} Mao mainly sent correspondence to Kim either approving or denying various requests and strategies that were run by him.\textsuperscript{23} This is similar to Joseph Stalin’s with Kim except for the encouraging telegrams. Though Mao was interested in aiding Korea to maintain a leadership role in the Asian theatre, Kim was not interested in looking to Mao as a leadership figure. Even though Mao aided North Korea and Kim accepted it still did not change the fact that both saw themselves as important figures for their respective countries and had different plans for them. Kim wanted Korea to be self-sufficient which did not include Chinese influence.

In conclusion after analyzing authors’ and historians’ interpretations of previously restricted documents along with translated communications between the three political readers one can see that the relationship of Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union, Mao Tse-tung of China, and Kim Il Sung of North Korea was based on personal agendas and the necessity of each other to complete those agendas led to a very “cold” relationship between them which dictated their actions in relation to the Korean war that took place from 1950 to 1953. Each political leader viewed the Korean War in a way that enabled them to further their own political and military agendas. Because of this their relationship came to be very “cold” in the sense that they only interacted when they thought they were able to get something thus dictating when and why they did something before and during the Korean War.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Korean War, 1950-1953, Wilson Center.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Korean War, 1950-1953, Wilson Center.
\end{itemize}
Bibliography


