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**SOVIET AIMS IN KOREA AND THE
ORIGINS OF THE KOREAN WAR,
1945-1950: NEW EVIDENCE FROM
RUSSIAN ARCHIVES**

**KATHRYN WEATHERSBY
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COLD WAR INTERNATIONAL HISTORY PROJECT

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CHRISTIAN F. OSTERMANN, Series Editor

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The invasion of South Korea by forces of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on 25 June 1950 was one of the defining moments of the Cold War. The North Korean attack so alarmed Washington that President Truman abruptly reversed the meticulously considered policy recently formulated by both the Department of State and Department of Defense that had placed Korea outside the American defense perimeter, and instead committed U.S. armed forces to the defense of South Korea. Viewing the North Korean assault as a case of Soviet aggression, likely a probing action to test Western resolve, the Truman administration concluded that the conflict with the Soviet Union had entered a new and more dangerous stage. The United States, it believed, needed to respond by preparing itself militarily and politically to meet the next act of Soviet aggression. Consequently, the administration moved quickly to implement the massive rearmament plan drawn up earlier that year, to defend Taiwan and the French position in Indochina, to solidify NATO, and to rearm West Germany. The outbreak of war in Korea also led the United States to conclude a separate peace with Japan and maintain military forces in Okinawa and South Korea. The image of "naked Soviet aggression" in Korea remained a powerful force in the making of U.S. foreign policy for many years; Washington's goal was to "prevent a Korea" in Europe or the Middle East.

On the surface it seems odd that the attack on South Korea should have elicited this far-reaching response from the United States. It was not, after all, the Soviet army that moved across the 38th parallel, but the army of North Korea, which, though clearly armed by the Soviet Union, was nevertheless attempting to reunify its own country, not engage in aggression against a neighboring state.¹ Moreover, it had been obvious for at least a year that war would break out in Korea; the bitterly opposing governments of the North and South were both determined to reunify the country under their own control. Indeed, the United States refused to supply South Korea with offensive weapons because it feared that Syngman Rhee would use them to march north.² And finally, Korea had limited strategic importance to the United States. In the months preceding

¹ The Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the People's Democratic Republic of Korea (North Korea) had been established in 1948 as separate states. However, the division of the country had been the action of the US and USSR, not of Koreans themselves, who had never accepted the division as legitimate or permanent. Furthermore, the great powers officially regarded the establishment of independent states in the two occupation zones as a provisional measure; both occupying powers remained officially committed to the establishment of a unified government for Korea.

² For a discussion of American military support to the ROK see Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume II, The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 472-78.

June 1950, U.S. officials had stated publicly the administration's decision not to intervene should North Korea attempt to reunify the peninsula by force.³

Then why did the outbreak of this widely anticipated civil war in a strategically marginal country convince Washington that America's security was in danger? Following a logic that was to become characteristic of Cold War conflicts, it was not the objective significance of the attack but rather the perception of what this event signified about Soviet intentions that so galvanized the American government.

In early 1950, U.S. policymakers' concerns about the danger to the United States and its allies from further Soviet territorial expansion had been heightened by two events of the previous year, the detonation of the first Soviet atomic bomb in August 1949 and the establishment that October of a revolutionary communist government in China. Those concerns were expressed most clearly and influentially in a far-reaching policy statement drawn up in the spring of 1950 by the State and Defense Departments, under the direction of Paul Nitze, who had recently replaced George F. Kennan as director of State's Policy Planning Staff. The report, NSC-68, started from the assumption that the Kremlin sought "to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world." Soviet efforts toward that end now aimed at gaining domination over the Eurasian land mass, the report concluded, and had recently grown bolder in response to America's relative military weakness. NSC-68 argued that if the United States failed to move decisively to counter future Soviet aggression, U.S. allies in Western Europe would lose heart and drift into a dangerous neutrality. The report warned that any American failure to respond to Soviet aggression, which would more likely be "piecemeal" than total war, could lead to "a descending spiral of too little and too late . . . of ever narrower and more desperate alternatives . . . of gradual withdrawals under pressure until we discover one day that we have sacrificed positions of vital interest."⁴

From the perspective of the schematic thinking represented in NSC-68, the sudden, massive assault on the American client state in South Korea by armed forces of the Soviet client state in North Korea clearly constituted a challenge the United States must answer. Indeed, the Truman administration responded immediately. Leading officials within the government concluded that the North Korean invasion of South Korea was the opening salvo in a broader

³ Most famously, of course, was Secretary of State Dean Acheson's speech to the National Press Club on 12 January 1950. But there were others as well, such as an interview with the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Tom Connally, published in *U.S. News & World Report*, 5 May 1950, 28-31.

⁴ For the report's text, see "NSC-68, A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security, April 14, 1950," *Naval War College Review* 27 (May/June 1975), 51-108. For discussions of the relationship between NSC-68 and the Korean War see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 89-126; and Marc Trachtenberg, "A 'Wasting Asset': American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949-1954," *International Security* 13:3 (Winter 1988/89), 5-49.

Soviet assault; West Germany, or perhaps Iran, was the next likely target. The U.S. government consequently committed military forces to the defense of South Korea and took the additional measures enumerated above.⁵

The U.S. perception of the Soviet role in the outbreak of the Korean War and of Soviet aims in Korea thus played an important role in escalating and shaping the Cold War. Analyses of that role have been, therefore, a necessary part of the scholarly literature on the Cold War. In the absence of Soviet documentary sources, however, these analyses have been based on very limited evidence and have reached widely varying conclusions. The earliest accounts generally agreed with the interpretation of the U.S. government. For example, David Rees, in what was for many years the standard history of the war, described the North Korean invasion as a “Soviet war plan.”⁶ Similarly, David Dallin concluded that Stalin “planned, prepared and initiated” the attack.⁷ Robert Slusser, in an analysis of Stalin’s aims in Korea, argued that Stalin’s lack of initiative on the Korean question in the early postwar period was an attempt to mask his expansionist goals on the peninsula.⁸

The most important revisionist account, Bruce Cumings’ monumental two-volume study of the origins of the Korean War,⁹ concluded that the question remains open whether it was in fact the DPRK or the ROK that initiated the military action on 25 June 1950. Cumings argued that it is possible that the North was responding to a provocation from South Korea, as the DPRK has consistently maintained. With regard to the Soviet role, Cumings depicted the Soviet influence over the DPRK as minimal, far less important than that of the Chinese Communist party. He contended that Soviet controls over the DPRK were “flimsy,” and that Kim Il Sung could have acted independently of Moscow, since the DPRK “was by no means reliant solely on Soviet arms.” He furthermore called it “nonsense” to suggest that Stalin would have approved the invasion because he thought the United States would not intervene.¹⁰

⁵ The decision of the Truman administration to intervene has been extensively examined. See, e.g., Glenn Paige, *The Korean Decision* (Glencoe, Ill.:The Free Press, 1968); James Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941-1950* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985); Stephen Pelz, “U.S. Decisions on Korean Policy, 1943-1950: Some Hypotheses,” in Bruce Cumings, ed., *Child of Conflict: The Korean-American Relationship, 1943-1953* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983); Burton I. Kaufman, *The Korean War: Challenges in Crisis, Credibility and Command* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); William W. Stueck, Jr., *The Road to Confrontation: American Foreign Policy toward China and Korea, 1947-1950* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Cumings, *Origins of the Korean War, vol. II*.

⁶ David Rees, *Korea: The Limited War* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), 19.

⁷ David Dallin, *Soviet Foreign Policy After Stalin* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1961), 60.

⁸ Robert Slusser, “Soviet Far Eastern Policy, 1945-1950: Stalin’s Goals in Korea,” in Yonosuke Nagai and Akira Iriye, eds., *The Origins of the Cold War in Asia* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1977), 123-46.

⁹ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume I: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Cumings, *Origins of the Korean War, vol. II*

¹⁰ Cumings, *Origins of the Korean War, vol. II*, 445-48, 619.

Other scholars have granted a more central role for the Soviet Union in the outbreak of the Korean War but have focused on Stalin's relations with Mao as the determining factor in Soviet policy. Marshall Shulman, for example, concluded that Stalin probably approved the war plan because "the Chinese were prepared to drive ahead with or without the Russians. This put the Russians in a painful dilemma: even if they preferred to be cautious they would lose whatever influence they hoped to exercise over the Chinese revolution and, specifically, they would lose their dominant position in North Korea."¹¹

Adam Ulam also located Stalin's motivation in his strategy toward the PRC. He concluded that the attack on South Korea was certainly launched with the permission of the Soviets and "even more likely at their explicit orders," but it was not undertaken in order to gain control over South Korea, "a negligible prize, certainly not worth the risk incurred in authorizing the operation." Instead, Ulam suspected that Stalin could have foreseen that Washington would protect Taiwan should war break out in Korea, and that Mao, faced with the possibility of a renewed civil war on the mainland, would thus require Soviet support. "It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the Korean imbroglio was instigated by the Russians for the specific purpose of discouraging the Chinese Communists from breaking away from Soviet tutelage."¹²

In the absence of solid evidence, however, the questions have remained. Did Stalin seek to gain control over the entire Korean peninsula? Was the attack on South Korea launched at the initiative of Moscow or Pyongyang? How much control did the Soviet Union have over North Korea? Did Soviet goals change significantly following its acquisition of nuclear capability, i.e., was Stalin growing bolder in early 1950? How were Soviet aims in Korea affected by the communist victory in China?

Within the last year, the archive of the Soviet Foreign Ministry¹³ and the two archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) have opened a portion of their files on Soviet involvement in Korea. Several Russian journals have recently published important memoir accounts by Soviet officers and diplomats who took part in Korean affairs during these years. Though North Korean archives remain closed, in recent months several former DPRK officers now living abroad have granted substantive interviews. The PRC has released a number of important documents on the origins of Chinese participation in the war and

¹¹ Marshall Shulman, *Stalin's Foreign Policy Reappraised* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 141.

¹² Adam Ulam, *The Communists: The Story of Power and Lost Illusions: 1948-1991* (New York and Toronto: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 81-82.

¹³ Formerly known as the Archive of the Foreign Policy of the USSR (abbreviated in Russian as AVP SSSR), the archive containing the records of the Soviet-era Foreign Ministry is now called the Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (abbreviated in Russian as AVP RF, for *Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*) and under the authority of the Russian Foreign Ministry.

several interviews with key Chinese participants have been published.¹⁴ Although important files in the Russian Defense Ministry, KGB, and Presidential archives remain closed, one may nonetheless now begin to address these questions on the basis of solid archival evidence and a broader range of memoir accounts. The purpose of this essay is to present preliminary conclusions on the question of Soviet aims in Korea using these newly available sources.

With regard to the question of Soviet expansionist objectives in Korea, the documentary evidence indicates very strongly that from February 1945 to April 1950 Stalin did *not* aim to gain control over the entire peninsula. Instead, he pursued the pre-1905 Russian policy toward Korea, which was to maintain a balance of power on the Korean peninsula, preventing any single power from gaining complete control over it. However, the nature of the Soviet political system made it impossible for Moscow to cooperate with other powers to maintain a 19th century-style balance of power. Instead, Stalin attempted to accomplish this aim by a crude division of the country, retaining the artificial division of the peninsula at the 38th parallel that had been initially proposed by the United States as a temporary measure.

The foundation of the postwar settlement for Korea was laid during the wartime negotiations among the Allies. In assessing postwar Soviet goals in northeast Asia it is important to note first of all that the dynamic driving Allied negotiations at Yalta and Potsdam over the postwar settlement in the Far East was significantly different from that governing the talks on European questions. In Europe, the Soviet Union was indisputably playing the major role in the war against Germany and was intent on securing a buffer zone in Eastern Europe, while the United States was playing a secondary role militarily and had relatively little interest in expanding its sphere of influence into Europe through the postwar political settlement. In the Far East, by contrast, the Soviet Union was playing no role at all militarily, while U.S. forces bore the brunt of the fighting. However, despite the absence of Russian troops in the Pacific theater, the persistent appeals from the United States for Soviet entry into the war against Japan placed Moscow in a position to set political terms for her eventual entry.¹⁵ At the same time, while in Europe the Soviet Union confronted rivals such as Great Britain and France who, though victors, were seriously weakened by the war, in the Far East Moscow confronted a greatly strengthened America. Furthermore, the United States had definite territorial aims in the Pacific: Roosevelt was determined to secure sole control over the occupation of Japan, to acquire jurisdiction over

¹⁴ For citations and analysis of those PRC materials see Chen Jian, "The Sino-Soviet Alliance and China's Entry into the Korean War," Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1991); and Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai, "China's Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited," *China Quarterly* 121 (March 1990), 94-115.

¹⁵ For a detailed account of those appeals, see the report by the U.S. Department of Defense, "The Entry of the Soviet Union into the War Against Japan: Military Plans, 1941-45" (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1955).

islands occupied by Japan during the war, and to maintain China as a unified state under a government dependent on the United States. In response, Stalin pursued aims in the Far East that were considerably less expansionist than those for Europe, balancing Soviet strategic concerns against indications of U.S. commitment.

At the Yalta conference of February 1945, after having been warmly invited by both Churchill and Roosevelt to enumerate the concessions he desired in exchange for entering the war against Japan, Stalin requested control over Southern Sakhalin and the Kuriles, lease of the Chinese-Eastern Railway and the Manchurian ports of Dairen and Port Arthur, and maintenance of the status quo in Outer Mongolia. With the exception of the southern Kuriles, these demands amounted to a return to Russia's position in the Far East prior to her defeat by Japan in 1905. They were minimal rather than maximal demands, in sharp contrast to Stalin's aims in Europe, where he sought territorial gains far beyond those ever attempted by the tsars.

With regard to Korea, at the Yalta conference Stalin made no demands at all. He simply agreed to Roosevelt's vaguely defined proposal for a joint trusteeship, without pressing for clarification and confirming only that Roosevelt did not intend to station troops on the peninsula.¹⁶ This approach to the Korean question was in keeping with the general aim of Russia's pre-1905 strategy, to maintain a balance of power in Korea in order to prevent any one power from gaining complete control over the peninsula.¹⁷ No documentary evidence of Stalin's approach to the Korean question at Yalta has yet come to light, but it is logical to conclude that Stalin's initial silence on Korea accorded with his pursuit of the traditional Russian policy, which did not lend itself to concrete territorial demands. Since Roosevelt's proposal for a joint trusteeship appeared to offer a means of fulfilling this traditional goal in Korea, Stalin accepted the American plan.

A reference paper on the Korean question written in June 1945 by two officials of the Second Far Eastern Department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry gives a good indication of Soviet

¹⁶ A.A.Gromyko, ed., *Krymskaia konferentsiia rukovoditelei trekh soiuznykh derzhav - SSSR, SShA i Velikobritanii, 4-11 fevralia, 1945 g.: sbornik dokumentov* (Moskva: Izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury, 1979), 140-42; U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, The Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1955), 768-70. (This series will hereafter be referred to as *FRUS*.) Roosevelt envisioned trusteeship as a period of tutelage during which the trustee nations would prepare the former colonies for self-governance. He applied the model to Korea because he was advised by State Department policy planners that "the exclusion of Koreans from important political posts for the past thirty-five years has emasculated them politically and deprived them of all experience in managing a state." Inter-Divisional Area Committee on the Far East, "Korean Political Problems: Provisional Government," 4 May 1944, *FRUS, 1944*, V, 1239-40.

¹⁷ For a full discussion of the precedent set by Tsarist policy toward Korea see Kathryn Weathersby, *Soviet Policy Toward Korea, 1944-1946* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1990), 1-74. It is perhaps worth noting that it was this ill-defined policy toward Korea that led Russia into the disastrous war with Japan in 1904.

thinking on the Korean question in the months following the Yalta conference.¹⁸ Written to provide background information for Soviet negotiators at the upcoming Potsdam conference, the report begins with a lengthy and accurate summary of the history of great power competition over Korea from the mid-19th century onward. The authors then quote the Allied declaration at the Cairo conference in 1943, which pledged that “in due course, Korea will become free and independent.” They note that “in due course” apparently signified a specified period of time during which Korea would be under the joint administration of several powers, who would, according to foreign press accounts, be the USSR, USA, China, and possibly Great Britain. The report then states five conclusions regarding the resolution of the Korean question.

First, the Russian struggle against Japanese expansion through Korea onto the continent of Asia (referring to the period through the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905) was “an historically justified act.” At that time, however, Russia lacked sufficient strength to prevent Japanese penetration into Korea, and, most importantly, had been diplomatically isolated, since Japan had had the support of England, the United States, and Germany. Second, the report concludes that “Japan must be forever excluded from Korea, since a Korea under Japanese rule would be a constant threat to the Far East of the USSR.”

Third, “the independence of Korea must be effective enough to prevent Korea from being turned into a staging ground for future aggression against the USSR, not only from Japan, but also from any other power which would attempt to put pressure on the USSR from the East. The surest guarantee of the independence of Korea and the security of the USSR in the East would be the establishment of friendly and close relations between the USSR and Korea. This must be reflected in the formation of a Korean government in the future.”

Fourth, the report envisions that the resolution of the Korean question may run into difficulties because of the former interests of the USA and China in Korea. Moreover, these two states may attempt to compensate Japan for its loss of Formosa and the Pescadores by giving it a “safety valve” in Korea, in the form of recognition of its economic interests on the peninsula. The report therefore concludes that “in the interests of the USSR the political and economic influence of Japan in Korea must be liquidated. Japan must be given only the possibility of trade with Korea on the basis of usual relations; it must not have the right to industrial or any other

¹⁸ The documents in the Central Committee and Foreign Ministry archives confirm the long-held assumption that there was anything but a free flow of opinion within the Soviet government during this period. In the hundreds of files I have examined, I have never seen a document indicating a policy debate of any kind. Consequently, one may safely conclude that a report such as this that was circulated within the Foreign Ministry reflected opinion from the top; if the recommendations it contained had not already been approved, the authors would never have written and circulated them.

concessions.” The fifth point states that if a trusteeship is established, “the Soviet Union must, of course, participate in it prominently.”¹⁹

It is clear, therefore, that the Soviet government keenly appreciated the history of Korea as a focus of great power competition in northeast Asia and as a springboard for Japanese expansion onto the Asian continent. Moscow consequently considered it vital for the security of the Soviet Far East that Korea not be in hostile hands. The report does not advocate annexation of the peninsula but rather that the government established there have “friendly and close relations” with the USSR. It should be noted that the authors mention U.S. and Chinese interests in Korea but continue to view Japan as the primary threat. As will be discussed below, this focus on the Japanese threat continued throughout the occupation period and even through the first year of the Korean War.

At Potsdam, Soviet negotiators did not have an opportunity to pursue directly their political aims for Korea. When Stalin and Foreign Minister V.M. Molotov raised the issue of trusteeships on July 22, Churchill strongly objected to a discussion of such plans, viewing the trusteeship concept as a U.S. attempt to dismantle the British empire. Although Truman had been urged by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson to press the issue of Korea and to station at least a token force on the peninsula during the trusteeship in order to counterbalance the Russian military presence, he nevertheless joined the other two heads of state in agreeing to refer the matter to the foreign ministers, since, as Churchill put it, “there were many more urgent matters to discuss here.”²⁰

Consequently, the only discussion of the Korean question at Potsdam occurred during the meetings of Allied military officials. In keeping with the policy of pursuing a balance of power on the peninsula, Soviet representatives declined an opportunity to gain full control over military operations in Korea. Army General A. I. Antonov first asked if the Americans planned to land ground forces in Korea. When informed that the United States did not plan to make amphibious landings on the Korean coast, he then proposed that the peninsula be included in the Soviet zone for ground operations and the U.S. zone for air and naval operations.²¹ Finally, in the most telling move of the wartime period, on August 14 Stalin approved without discussion a U.S. proposal presented that day to divide Korea into two occupation zones along the 38th parallel. He instructed Soviet ground forces to stop their rapid advance into Korea at the 38th parallel,

¹⁹ Zhukov and Zabrodin, “Korea, Short Report,” 29 June 1945, AVP RF, Fond 0430, Opis 2, Delo 18, Papka 5, 1. 18-30.

²⁰ *FRUS, Potsdam*, II, 252-56; A.A.Gromyko, *Berlinskaia (Potsdamskaia) konferentsiia rudovoditelei trelkh soiuznykh derzhav-SSSR, SSh i Velikobritanii: 17 julia - 2 avgusta, 1945 g.: sbornik dokumentov* (Moskva: Izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury, 1980), 139-43.

²¹ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference)*, vol. II (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1960), 345-53, 408.

even though U.S. forces would not reach the peninsula until early September and even though this last-minute proposal contradicted the agreement just concluded at Potsdam.²²

Once Soviet forces established their occupation zone in northern Korea, they moved forcefully to seal off their half of the peninsula from the southern portion. Soviet troops halted mail deliveries and railway traffic across the 38th parallel, stopped shipments of coal to the south, and even obstructed the transmission of electrical power to the southern zone from the hydroelectrical plants in the northern zone. Throughout the fall of 1945, the Soviet occupation command rejected all American attempts to hold discussions on the severe difficulties caused in the south by this disruption in the flow of goods.²³

This tight closing of the border contrasted sharply with Soviet policy in Germany, where movement across sector borders remained quite free for several years. From comments by Soviet occupation officials reporting U.S. overtures concerning the various supply problems, it appears that the Soviets sealed off their occupation zone primarily in order to maintain control over the physical resources of northern Korea. The coal, electrical power, foodstuffs, etc., of northern Korea were to be used to supply the Soviet Far East as well as the Soviet occupation zone on the peninsula. In an indication of the physical devastation facing the Soviet Union at the end of the war, and of Moscow's desire to claim war booty, Soviet officers were flabbergasted by the requests of the Americans, astonished that they should think that "Soviet" coal, electrical power, etc., should be delivered to southern Korea.²⁴

Though the Soviet occupation command tightly sealed the 38th parallel against the movement of supplies, it did little to curb the flow of people from north to south, most of whom were returning to their original homes in the south from forced labor camps at industrial sites in Manchuria and northern Korea. According to U.S. records, approximately 1,600,000 persons moved into the southern zone during the fall of 1945; about 500,000 came from northern Korea, the rest from Manchuria.²⁵ Allowing the exodus of those who opposed Soviet occupation policies (primarily large landowners, Christians, and Koreans who had collaborated with the Japanese) greatly eased the process of establishing political control over northern Korea, though at the cost of losing the most highly skilled sector of the population.²⁶

²² *FRUS, 1945*, VI, 1039; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the U.S.S.R., *Correspondence Between the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R. and the Presidents of the U.S.A. and the Prime Ministers of Great Britain During the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945*, II (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), 260-66.

²³ *FRUS 1945*, VI, 1059-60, 1066, 1071-73, 1107, 1143-44.

²⁴ See, e.g., the regular reports sent by Foreign Ministry officials in Pyongyang to the Second Far Eastern Department of NKID in AVP RF, Fond 0102 (Referentura po Koree), Opis 2, Delo 33, 34, 35.

²⁵ *FRUS, 1945*, VI, 1144-48.

²⁶ One of the most striking aspects of the occupation period in Korea is the contrast between the severe social and political turmoil in the south and the relative quiet in the north. See Cumings, *Origins of the Korean War*, vols. I and II.

Three documents in the Foreign Ministry archive dated September 1945 indicate that at this time the Soviet government did not have a clearly delineated plan for a political settlement for Korea, but regarded the proposed trusteeship as a useful means of countering American gains in the Pacific and of fortifying the Soviet position in Manchuria. The Soviets' primary concern with regard to Korean territory was with securing control over three strategically important regions: Cheju Island and the ports of Pusan and Inchon. A report entitled "Notes on the Question of Former Japanese Colonies and Mandated Territories" stated:

- 1) Korea. The occupation of Korea by Soviet troops in the zone north of the 38th parallel must be kept for the same period of time as the American occupation of the remaining part of Korea. It is desirable to insist that the island Kvel'part [Cheju-do] be placed in the Chinese occupation zone, which can motivate Chinese interest in strengthening the strategic position of the Soviet-Chinese military-naval base at Port Arthur. Upon the conclusion of the occupation regime, presumably after two years, Korea must become a trust territory of the four powers, with apportionment of three strategic regions: Pusan (Tsinkai), Kvel'part Island (Saisiu), and Chemul'po (Dzinsen) [Inchon], which must be controlled by the Soviet military command. Insisting on the apportionment for the USSR of the strategic regions in Korea, we can exert pressure on the position of the Americans, using their wish to receive for themselves strategic regions in the Pacific Ocean. In case the proposal about granting to the Soviet Union these strategic regions in Korea is met with opposition, it is possible to propose joint Soviet-Chinese control over the strategic regions. In determining the future borders of Japan and Korea it will be necessary to advance a proposal about the transfer to Korea of the island of Tsushima, justified by the fact that throughout history Tsushima island has served as a staging ground for aggressive actions by Japan against the continental countries and in particular against Korea.
- 2) Formosa and Pescadores. It is advisable to support their return to China.
- 3) Ryukus. At the conclusion of the period of occupation [it is advisable to] to propose a regime of joint international trusteeship by the four powers or by China alone. Apparently, the United States will attempt to create its military bases on the Ryukus.
- 4) Bonin, Volkano, Marianas, Carolinas and Marshall Islands. At the conclusion of the period of occupation [it is advisable to] to propose a regime of international trusteeship. It will be possible to support the American claims to the strategic regions under the condition of the agreement of the USA to the Soviet proposal on Korea.²⁷

The Soviet proposal on Korea referred to above read:

²⁷ Author(s) not indicated, "Notes on the Question of Former Japanese Colonies and Mandated Territories," September 1945, AVP RF, Fond 0431I, Opis 1, Delo 52, Papka 8, 1. 40-43.

The Government of the USSR, proceeding from a desire to liquidate as soon as possible the pernicious consequences of the long Japanese rule in Korea and to facilitate the creation of conditions which will make possible the realization by the Korean people of the right to full sovereignty and national independence, in correspondence with the Cairo declaration of the three powers of December 1, 1943, which says that the allies have resolved that Korea in due course will be free and independent, and also based on article 77, point B of the Charter of the United Nations, which envisions the possibility of the establishment of international trusteeship over territories which can be taken from enemy states as a result of the Second World War, introduces the following proposals:

- 1) Upon the conclusion of the period of military occupation of the territory of Korea by the allied military forces, Korea must be taken under joint trusteeship by the four allied powers - USSR, USA, UK and the Chinese Republic.
- 2) The goal of trusteeship over Korea must be assistance in the political, economic and social restoration of the Korean people and the facilitation of their progressive development toward independence, in correspondence with article 76, point B of the Charter of the United Nations.
- 3) In the agreement which determines the condition of the trusteeship over Korea by the four powers, the apportionment of strategic regions must be provided for, in correspondence with article 82 of the U.N. Charter: Pusan and Tsinkai, Kvel'part Island, Dzinsen (Chemul'po). These regions, of essential importance for securing dependable sea communications and approaches to the Soviet military-naval base at Port Arthur, which is in joint use with the Chinese Republic, must be subject to special military control, carried out by the Government of the USSR, in correspondence with the provisions of the UN Charter.²⁸

The third document, "An Understanding on the Question of a Provisional Policy for the Laperuz, Sangarsky and Korean Straits," further reveals Soviet strategic concerns in the area of the Korean peninsula. It stated:

In light of the fact that the Soviet armed forces are not participating in the occupation of the homeland of Japan, our point of view concerning the provisional policy for the straits must be thus:

- 1) Full freedom of navigation for all allied nations in the indicated three straits. The regulations regarding Japanese ships sailing in the straits will be worked out later by the Control Council.
- 2) The policy concerning navigation in the three straits will be established by the Control Council. Control over the fulfillment of the policy will be carried out by a Control Commission created for each of the three straits from representatives of the USA, USSR, Great Britain and China.

²⁸ Author(s) not indicated, "Proposal on Korea," September 1945, AVP RF, Fond 0431I, Opis 1, Delo 52, Papka 8, l. 44-45.

Note: Independent of the question of the provisional policy on navigation in the straits or in connection with it, it is extremely important to raise the question of granting to the Soviet Pacific Trade Steamship Line water approaches and territory on the island of Tsushima and in the port of Hakodate for the purpose of creating two way-stations for the supply and mooring of Soviet coastal ships sailing on the Vladivostok-Genzan-Dal'ny line and Soviet commercial vessels sailing on the Vladivostok-USA-Canada line.²⁹

The above three documents indicate clearly that in September 1945 Moscow's aim was to protect Soviet strategic interests through some sort of joint administration of Korea. Stalin's goal was not simply to gain control over the entire peninsula, as, for example, he was determined to gain control over Poland. Instead, he was pursuing a more complicated strategy, one of balancing competing interests in Korea, and waiting for U.S. initiatives before proposing a concrete settlement for the peninsula.

While the Korean question remained unresolved, Stalin was reluctant to support the activities of the communist party in South Korea or to engage in any direct Soviet agit-prop work in the American zone. The records on Korea from the International Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU reveal that in the fall of 1945 Soviet occupation authorities were very active in creating Soviet-style social and political structures in northern Korea, including reorganizing and closely guiding the operation of the communist party.³⁰ However, this work did not extend beyond the 38th parallel. The Central Committee of the Korean Communist Party, which was headquartered in Seoul, repeatedly requested the aid of the Soviet party apparatus attached to the occupation command, particularly for help in persuading the American authorities to allow the KCP to operate legally. However, throughout the remainder of 1945, the Soviet command refused to make any intervention on behalf of Korean communists in the south.³¹ Instead, they instructed party members in the south to cooperate with American authorities because "the correct strategic line can take place only through a correct understanding of the international position of Korea . . . The ideals of the United States, the leader of capitalism, and the Soviet Union, the fatherland of the proletariat, are to be expressed in Korea without contradiction."³² None of the reports from Korea from 1945 mentions any Soviet agitation-

²⁹ Author(s) not indicated, "An Understanding on the Question of a Provisional Policy for the Laperuz, Sangarsky and Korean Straits," September 1945, AVP RF, Fond 0431I, Opis 1, Delo 52, Papka 8, 11. 47-48.

³⁰ Numerous reports of such activity are found in the pre-1952 CPSU Central Committee archive, now called the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Recent History (henceforth RTsKhIDNI), Fond 17, Opis 128.

³¹ See report to Central Committee from Politupravlenie of Primorsky Military Region, 5 November 1945, RTsKhIDNI, Fond 17, Opis 128, Delo 47, 1. 19-21.

³² See editorial published in the party newspaper, *Haebang Ilbo*, 31 October 1945, titled "The International Relevance of the Korean Revolution," in Chong-sik Lee, *Materials on Korean Communism, 1945-47* (Honolulu: Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawaii, 1977), 41.

propaganda work in the south.³³ Soviet attempts to avoid conflict with the Americans over Korea are particularly striking in light of the political strength of the Korean communists in 1945 and the extreme unpopularity of U.S. occupation policies; of all the areas along the periphery in which the Soviet Union was involved in 1945, Korea offered one of the best chances for an indigenous communist victory.³⁴

The specific terms for the proposed trusteeship for Korea were finally worked out at the Moscow foreign ministers' conference in December 1945. The Soviet Union and the United States agreed to establish a provisional democratic government in Korea, which, together with a joint Soviet-American commission, would work out the measures involved in establishing a four-power trusteeship over Korea for a period of five years. This agreement became the basis for all subsequent diplomatic action regarding Korea and the cornerstone of Soviet policy for the remainder of the pre-Korean War period. The Soviet government held firmly to the principle of upholding the Moscow agreement because, as will be explained below, through an unexpected turn of events, it became a means for Moscow to attain its goals in Korea by preventing the establishment of a unified government on the peninsula.

By December 1945, the Soviet government had abandoned its earlier plans to protect its strategic interests by gaining control over Pusan, Inchon, and Cheju Island. From the first weeks of the joint occupation, the U.S.-Soviet relationship on the Korean peninsula was so hostile that it was clearly useless to hope that the Americans would give up control over these three important regions in their zone. The Soviet government also felt that it was politically disadvantageous to oppose the creation of a unified government for Korea. However, given the hostility of the extremely right-wing Koreans the Americans had put in power in the South, it was difficult for Moscow to devise a solution whereby it could protect its interests while at the same time allow the creation of a unified government.

Briefing papers for the December conference suggest that Stalin's primary concern with regard to Korea continued to be the threat of a resurgent Japan. A section of one such paper, titled "Necessity for the Restoration of the Unity of Korea," stated that it is obvious that the country needs to be reunited, but "if Soviet policy is directed at the destruction of the military

³³ See, e.g., the "Top Secret" report on the political situation in Korea from Korneev to Paniushkin at the Central Committee, 20 November 1945, RTsKhIDNI, Fond 17, Opis 128, Delo 47, 1. 22 ff., and the lengthy report from Zabrodin, Deputy Chief of the Second Far Eastern Department of NKID, to Paniushkin at the Central Committee, titled "Measures of American Occupation Authorities in Korea," 27 November 1945, RTsKhIDNI, Fond 17, Opis 128, Delo 47, 1. 26-33, in both of which one would expect to see mention of Soviet agitation-propaganda work in the south.

³⁴ For an exhaustive account of the situation in South Korea at the end of World War II see Cumings, *Origins of the Korean War, vol. I*. See also George M. McCune, *Korea Today* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950); Dae-sook Suh, *The Korean Communist Movement, 1918-1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); and Robert Scalapino and Chong-sik Lee, *Communism in Korea, Part I: The Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

capability of the Japanese aggressors, at the eradication of Japanese influence in Korea, at the encouragement of the democratic movement of the Korean people and preparing them for independence, then judging by the activity of the Americans in Korea, American policy has precisely the opposite goal. The Americans not only have retained in Korea the old administrative apparatus, but they have also left many Japanese and local collaborators in leading posts. In the American zone, Japanese enjoy broad political rights and economic possibilities. American policy elicits the indignation of the Korean people and does not at all facilitate the establishment of unity and the creation of an independent democratic Korea. From this it follows that the main obstacle to the restoration of the unity of Korea is the working out and realization of a single occupation policy.”³⁵

Establishing a single occupation policy would clearly be very difficult, however. In another briefing paper, titled “The Question of a Single Provisional Government for Korea,” Zabrodin, Deputy Chief of the Foreign Ministry’s 2nd Far Eastern Department, wrote that “the question is extremely complex, because of the multiplicity of political parties and groups, the lack of unity among them and the solicitations of the USA . . . Meanwhile, the character of the future government of Korea cannot but interest the Soviet Union, since the character of this government will be one of the decisive moments in the determination of the future conduct of the Provisional Korean Government in the area of the internal and external policy of Korea and on which, consequently, will depend the question of whether Korea will in the future be turned into a breeding ground of new anxiety for us in the Far East or into one of the strong points of our security in the Far East.” Zabrodin concluded that the creation of a Korean government could be realized in the following possible ways:

- 1) The creation of a Korean government on the basis of agreement between the governments of the USSR, USA and China. In the formation of the composition of the government the introduction into the government of communists and genuinely democratic elements will meet with strong opposition from the Korean reactionary elements, since such a government would undoubtedly be inclined in favor of closer relations with the Soviet Union. It also goes without saying that these reactionary elements will find support among the governments of the USA and China.
- 2) The convening of a Representative People’s Assembly, to which must be elected representatives of the entire Korean people (excluding traitors) by means of universal, secret and equal voting. The People’s Assembly must proclaim a Korean Republic and create a Korean People’s Government. The latter would be

³⁵ Petukhov, Adviser 2nd Far Eastern Department, “Soviet-American Occupation of Korea and the Question of Economic and Political Ties Between North and South Korea,” December 1945, AVP RF, Fond 0102, Opis 1, Delo 15, Papka 1, 1. 8-10.

the more acceptable form of resolving the question of the creation of a government in Korea.³⁶

A Foreign Ministry background report written by Jacob Malik, “On the Question of a Single Government for Korea,” reveals that in December 1945 the Soviet Union was planning specific measures for organizing elections to a provisional government for Korea. Malik began by stating that “it would be politically inexpedient for the Soviet Union to oppose the creation of a single Korean government.” He then described the position of the communist party in Korea and made specific recommendations:

- 1) To support and declare anew the independence and sovereignty of Korea.
- 2) To express support for the creation of a provisional government for Korea and to elect this government with the participation of all Korean social and political organizations.
- 3) All these organizations must elect a provisional committee for the preparation of the convocation of a constituent assembly.
- 4) The convocation of the constituent assembly must be preceded by the conducting of broad democratic meetings in the localities and among the workers, peasants, intellectuals, teachers, employees and other groups for wide discussion and putting forward of candidates as delegates to the constituent assembly and as officeholders in the united government of Korea.
- 5) To form a special joint commission from representatives of the USSR and USA for conducting this preparatory work (possibly to include also representatives from China and England).
- 6) To resolve all the immediate questions arising from the fact of the presence on the territory of Korea of Soviet and American troops, to create a Special Soviet-American Commission from representatives of Soviet and American commands.³⁷

The recommendations, compiled as the Soviet delegation prepared for the Moscow conference, are cumbersome and inexact, because in fact there was no way to create a unified government that would satisfy both the Soviets and the Americans. The Soviet authorities were well aware of Syngman Rhee’s political views; there are reports about him, describing him as anti-Soviet, dating from early 1945.³⁸ In December 1945, as part of the preparations for the anticipated elections, the 2nd Far Eastern Department of the Foreign Ministry compiled a biographical report on Rhee, Kim Koo, and other leaders in the South. The report described Rhee as the most reactionary figure among Korean political leaders and concluded that “as a true servant of American capital, Rhee Syngman dreams of creating an independent Korea in which, in

³⁶ Zabrodin, “The Question of a Single Provisional Government for Korea,” December 1945, *ibid.*, 1. 11-17.

³⁷ Malik, “On the Question of a Single Government for Korea,” 10 December 1945, *ibid.*, 1. 18-21.

³⁸ See reports on a letter from Rhee to the Soviet government written 28 March 1945, AVP RF, Fond 0129, Opis 29, Delo 18, Papka 168.

place of Japanese oppressors, Korean landlords and capitalists supported by the USA will sit on the neck of the Korean people.” Speaking of Kim Koo, the report said that “there is no doubt that the Americans will try to use this leader of the Korean reactionaries for their purposes.”³⁹ Given Soviet concerns about the threat to the security of the Far East that would be posed by a hostile government in Korea, it clearly would have been impossible for the Soviet side to approve the creation of a government in Korea which included Syngman Rhee, Kim Koo, and others supported by the Americans.

The Soviet Union also had very specific economic aims in northern Korea which they would be unable to realize should a government hostile to the USSR come to power on the peninsula. Another briefing paper for the December conference, “A Report on Japanese Military and Heavy Industry in Korea,” written by Suzdalev, Senior Advisor of the Foreign Ministry’s 2nd Far Eastern Department, gave a detailed list of Japanese property in Korea and drew three conclusions:

1. Japanese enterprises of military and heavy industry in Korea, having been created for the purpose of serving Japanese aggressive policy and having actively fulfilled that role, indisputably must be fully taken away from Japan.
2. Japanese enterprises of military and heavy industry located in North Korea must be considered trophies of the Red Army, since all these enterprises to one degree or another worked for the Japanese army, which fought against the Red Army, and were seized from the Japanese at the cost of great sacrifices by the Red Army.
3. Finally, the Japanese military and heavy industry in North Korea must be transferred to the Soviet Union as partial payment of reparations, and also as compensation for the huge damage inflicted by Japan on the Soviet Union throughout the time of its existence, including the damages from the Japanese intervention in the Far East from 1918 to 1923.⁴⁰

It is thus clear from these policy papers that as the Soviet government entered the negotiations over Korea at the Moscow conference of foreign ministers, its intention was to create a unified government for Korea, since it was politically inexpedient to oppose the demands of the Koreans and Americans to do so. At the same time, however, Moscow was quite concerned about how it would create a unified government for Korea and simultaneously safeguard Soviet strategic and economic interests. The solution to this dilemma emerged in early January 1946 through the fierce opposition of Koreans to the Moscow conference decision on trusteeship.

³⁹ Petukhov, Adviser, 2nd Far Eastern Department, reports titled “Syngman Rhee” and “Kim Koo,” 13 December 1945, AVP RF, Fond 0102, Opis 1, Delo 9, Papka 1, 1. 33-48.

⁴⁰ Suzdalev, “A Report on Japanese Military and Heavy Industry in Korea,” December 1945, AVP RF, Fond 0102, Opis 1, Delo 15, Papka 1, 1. 22-29.

Koreans greeted the announcement of the Moscow conference decision with the strongest possible outrage. As an American military official reported, “in Seoul, only the dropping of an atomic bomb could have created more excitement. Japan, in 1905, had taken over the land under what was called a ‘trusteeship.’ Here was the awful word again; Korea had been betrayed!”⁴¹ In the north, the occupation command organized massive demonstrations in support of the decision,⁴² but in cities throughout the American zone Koreans took to the streets by the thousands to demand its abrogation. The Soviet authorities responded by immediately ordering the Korean Communist Party in the south to demonstrate in favor of the Moscow decision. Although the KCP had consistently opposed the idea of trusteeship, on 2 January 1946, while massive street demonstrations were going on throughout southern Korea against the Moscow conference decision, the KCP’s Central Committee adopted a statement of support. Reflecting what must have been instructions from Soviet party officials, the statement declared that “at the present time the three great powers are continuing to carry the responsibility for the leadership of the world, in the same manner as they carried the responsibility during the war against fascism. Therefore the decision of the Moscow Conference of Three Foreign Ministers is a further development and strengthening of democratism. . . The decision . . . was engendered by the situation which exists in Korea itself, specifically the pernicious consequences of the long period of Japanese imperial rule and the lack of national unity. We cannot not admit that such a situation in fact exists. Despite that, several are attempting to lay the responsibility for such a decision on the question of Korea on the three allied powers. These people are attempting openly and directly to oppose the decision of the Moscow conference. They portray the friendly aid and cooperation of the three states as the establishment of an imperialistic protectorate, similar to the earlier rule of Japanese aggressive imperialism.” Finally, and most tortuously, given the KCP’s position as the truest representative of Korean nationalism, the party asserted that “the Korean question must be resolved in the spirit of the strengthening of international cooperation and democracy,” a phrase which was underlined by the reader at the CPSU Central Committee.⁴³

Throughout the early months of 1946, as the Joint Soviet-American Commission met in Seoul, the KCP continued to be the only political group in Korea to express support for the Moscow decision. All other political parties remained unequivocally opposed to the establishment of a trusteeship, a situation which provided the Soviet Union with a solution to its dilemma regarding Korea. The directive to the Soviet delegation to the Joint Commission instructed it to

⁴¹ Richard E. Lauterbach, *Danger from the East* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1947), 226.

⁴² See Generalov in Pyongyang to Lozovsky at the Foreign Ministry, 9 January 1946, AVP RF, Fond 0102, Opis 2, Delo 20, Papka 3, 1. 1-2.

⁴³ RTsKhIDNI, Fond 17, Opis 128, Delo 205, 1. 2-4. A copy of the statement was sent to the Central Committee in Moscow from the Chief of the 7th Upravlenie of GlavPURKA, who had received it from the Politupravlenie of the Primorsky Military Region.

insist that in the preparations for elections for a provisional government for Korea, a process stipulated by the Moscow agreement, only those political groups which supported the Moscow decision could be consulted.⁴⁴ The American delegation predictably refused this limitation, since it would mean that only communists would participate in forming the provisional government. Throughout the lengthy negotiations the Soviet delegation held firmly to this position, with the result that on 8 May 1946, the Joint Commission adjourned *sine die*. The Soviet position at the Joint Commission then became the cornerstone of Soviet policy toward Korea for the remainder of the occupation period.

On the surface this was a perfect solution; it allowed Moscow to maintain the division of the country, and hence control over the resources and territory of the northern half, while at the same time protect its political position by posing as the true defender of the agreement on unification signed by both occupying powers. With regard to an analysis of Soviet aims, it is significant that this solution was accomplished at the expense of disgracing the Korean Communist Party in the south. More importantly, however, this crude resolution of the Korean question created a volatile situation on the peninsula because it disregarded the most fundamental aspiration of Korean communists in the north, which was, quite naturally, to end the unjust division of their country.

In February 1946, while the Joint Commission was still meeting in Seoul, Soviet occupation authorities began creating a separate government in North Korea. The Central Committee archive in Moscow contains voluminous documentation of the drafting by Soviet officials of the constitution and laws for North Korea. Central Committee files also contain reports on the assistance the Soviet Union provided in training cadres and technical workers and in establishing propaganda mechanisms and Soviet-style social organizations.⁴⁵ One document in the Central Committee files reveals continued Soviet attempts to set KCP policy in the South,⁴⁶ but there is no mention of direct Soviet involvement in agitation work in the American zone or of information gained from Soviet contacts in South Korea. All reports to Moscow on the political situation in South Korea were based only on Seoul press and radio.⁴⁷ Foreign Ministry files

⁴⁴ Draft directions from Lozovsley to Molotov, 13 March 1946, AVP RF, Fond 18, Opis 8, Delo 79, Papka 6, l. 4-11. Reflecting the concern to maintain control over the physical resources of the Soviet zone, the last paragraph of the directive stated that "if from the American side there is an attempt to raise for discussion the question of economic unification of Korea, you must reject this attempt in accordance with the above motives (the task of creating a provisional government, in accordance with the Moscow decision), and explain that the exchange of goods between north and south Korea will be conducted according to agreement between the commanders of both zones of military responsibility in the form of mutual deliveries."

⁴⁵ RTsKhIDNI, Fond 17, Opis 128, Delo 1119.

⁴⁶ Chief of Politupravlenie of Primorsky Military Region, report to Zhdanov at the Central Committee, 26 August 1946, RTsKhIDNI, Fond 17, Opis 128, Delo 205, l. 132-33.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., telegram to Central Committee, 2 October 1946, reporting the strike of railway workers in S. Korea, taken from Seoul radio, RTsKhIDNI, Fond 17, Opis 128, Delo 205, l. 173-176; a report to Central Committee on

reveal that propaganda literature from VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries) was sent to North Korea, China, and Japan, but not to South Korea.⁴⁸ It is possible, of course, that reports from Soviet agitators in South Korea are to be found in the KGB or Defense Ministry archives. However, it seems unlikely that top secret communication between Foreign Minister Molotov and General Terenti Fomich Shtykov, the highest-ranking Soviet official in North Korea, would have omitted all mention of Soviet agitation or intelligence sources in South Korea.

It should be pointed out in this connection that General Shtykov, who was a member of the Military Council of the Maritime Military District as well as head of the Soviet occupation forces in Korea, exercised extremely close supervision over political events in North Korea. One indication of this control is a letter Shtykov wrote to Molotov on 20 January 1948, reporting on the upcoming session of the National Assembly. Shtykov asked Molotov to sanction the convening of the session, with the attached agenda, and informed him that the attached resolution would be adopted. He also asked Molotov's permission to create a Department of National Defense attached to the People's Committees and to hold a rally in Pyongyang on the final day of the assembly. Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Vyshinsky then wrote to Stalin on January 24, communicating the contents of Shtykov's letter and recommending that his proposals be approved.⁴⁹ Thus the apparent lack of Soviet activity in the American zone did not stem from a lack of attention to Korea as a whole.

The flaw in Soviet policy toward Korea was that while Stalin was not interested in extending Soviet control into southern Korea, the highly nationalistic Korean communists whom Soviet occupation officials placed in power in North Korea were quite determined to extend their authority over the rest of the country. Beginning in 1947, after the failure of the autumn uprisings in the South and the severe repression of southern communists by American and South Korean authorities, virtually all communications to Moscow from North Korean leaders referred to the eventual unification of their country. For example, a letter to Stalin from the Congress of the People's Committees of North Korea, dated 20 February 1947, filled with slavish praise of Stalin and the friendship of the Soviet and Korean peoples, stated that "the Korean people impatiently await the unification of South and North Korea and the rapid creation of a unified democratic

19 October 1946, about strikes in other South Korean cities, RTsKhIDNI, Fond 17, Opis 128, Delo 205, l. 189-193; report to Malik at MID, 3 March 1947, about the arrests of leftists in Seoul, taken from Korean newspapers, AVP RF, Fond 07, Opis 12, Delo 320, Papka 25, l. 22-23; report from General Shtykov to Malik at MID, 7 June 1947, titled "Information about the Situation in North and South Korea after Resumption of the Work of the Joint Commission," taken from newspaper articles, AVP RF, Fond 1 DVO, Opis 6, Delo 9, Papka 2; the reports of events in Seoul, compiled nearly daily during 1948 by the political adviser in North Korea, Balasanov, taken from Seoul radio, AVP RF, Fond 1 DVO, Opis 8, Delo 6 and 7.

⁴⁸ VOKS letter to MID, 25 September 1947, AVP RF, Fond 1 DVO, Opis 7, Delo 26, Papka 5.

⁴⁹ AVP RF, Fond 07, Opis 21, Delo 316, Papka 22, l. 1-4.

provisional government for Korea.”⁵⁰ A reply of 1 March 1947 from the Presidium of the Congress of People’s Committees to a congratulatory letter from Molotov stated that “considering that Korea has until now not been united, the people of North Korea are applying all their efforts toward the unification of the country and the creation of a democratic government based on the Moscow decision.”⁵¹ Kim Il Sung’s reply to another congratulatory message from Molotov, on the 15 August 1947 commemoration of Korea’s liberation from Japanese rule, declared that “your greeting . . . increases our belief that at the soonest possible time a united democratic Korean government will be created and Korea will be a fully independent state. I am convinced that as a result of the efforts of the Soviet Union and of you personally, the question of the creation of a Provisional Democratic government for Korea will be resolved in the spirit of the Moscow agreement of the Three Foreign Ministers, which responds to the interests of the entire Korean people.”⁵²

Stalin was therefore caught by his own rhetoric. The doublespeak of his formula for maintaining the division of Korea—constant assertion of the Soviet commitment to unification and independence through the Moscow decision of December 1945—was easily used by North Koreans to push for support for the literal meaning of Soviet proclamations. The first communication between Stalin and the newly established Korean Democratic People’s Republic illustrates this dynamic. In his telegram to Kim Il Sung on 13 October 1948, approving Kim’s request to establish diplomatic and economic relations with the USSR, Stalin stated that “the Soviet government, invariably defending the right of the Korean people to create their united independent state, salutes the formation of the Korean Government and wishes it success in its activity toward national rebirth and democratic development.”⁵³ Thus, although until April 1950 Stalin did not attempt to extend the Soviet position in Korea beyond the limits established by the Allied wartime agreements,⁵⁴ the means he used to retain control over the Soviet zone made it more likely that the northern leaders themselves would upset the crude balance of power the Allies had established on the peninsula.

⁵⁰ AVP RF, Fond 1 DVO, Opis 7, Delo 2, Papka 3.

⁵¹ AVP RF, Fond I DVO, Opis 7, Delo 14, Papka 5. Molotov’s letter was dated 20 February 1947.

⁵² AVP RF, Fond 1 DVO, Opis 7, Delo 14, Papka 5; also Fond 07, Opis 12, Delo 327, Papka 25, l. 9. Kim’s reply was dated 18 August 1947.

⁵³ AVP RF, Fond I DVO, Opis 8, Delo 1, Papka 6.

⁵⁴ Russian historian Gavril Korotkov (Institute of Military History, Moscow) has reported to this author and to journalists that he has copies of still-classified documents from the Russian Defense Ministry archives indicating that Stalin and Kim discussed plans to invade South Korea during Kim’s March 1949 trip to Moscow. (See *Yonhap* (Seoul), 23 June 1993, in FBIS-SOV-93-119 (23 June 1993), 14, and Douglas Stanglin and Peter Cary, “Secrets of the Korean War,” *US News & World Report*, 9 August 1993, 45-47.) I cannot comment on the accuracy of this report or place this information into context until I see the documents in question. However, given what we know of Stalin’s behavior in 1949, I suspect that such discussions were a part of Stalin’s tactics for dealing with the volatile Kim as well as part of ongoing military contingency planning. We may look forward to the publication of Prof. Korotkov’s manuscript (“The Generalissimo’s Last War”) to shed further light on this question.

The documentary evidence released thus far indicates that Stalin's interest in maintaining control over the northern half of Korea stemmed from the territory's strategic significance and its potential as a source of economic resources. These two benefits could be secured without continuing the military occupation, as long as a reliably "friendly" government was maintained in Pyongyang. Therefore, after proposing in September 1947 an immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from Korea, Soviet troops left the peninsula by the end of 1948, seven months before the withdrawal of American forces, but the USSR retained in North Korea military advisors, technicians, and naval personnel.⁵⁵

Reflecting the two primary interests listed above, in March 1949 Moscow concluded eleven agreements with the newly created DPRK. These concerned economic and cultural cooperation; technical assistance and extension of credit to North Korea; commodity circulation and payments; payments for deliveries of goods outside the agreement of 31 July 1948; conditions for the work of Soviet specialists sent to North Korea and North Korean specialists sent to the USSR for practical training in industrial/technical work; the temporary stationing of a Soviet naval unit at the port of Seisin; establishment of a Soviet trade representative in the DPRK; construction of a railway line from the Kraskino Primorskoï station to a station of the Khonio Severo-Koreiski Railway; and the establishment of regular air links between the USSR and DPRK.⁵⁶ Apparently reflecting continued concern to avoid alarming the Americans over developments in Korea, all of these agreements were classified secret except the agreement on economic and cultural cooperation.⁵⁷

The overwhelming emphasis during the week-long negotiations over these agreements was on trade relations. The Soviet Union agreed to continue to supply North Korea with arms and equipment, and the DPRK agreed to pay for these deliveries partly in gold and partly in goods such as rice and minerals. The tone of the discussions suggested hard bargaining, not "aid." The Soviet representatives pressed for earlier payments, Kim Il Sung questioned Soviet figures on the Korean debt, and both sides haggled over how much of the payments could be deferred through

⁵⁵ On 6 July 1949, N. Fedorenko reported to Vyshinsky that "According to the data communicated to us by General Sologubovskiy at the Administration of Foreign Relations (MVS), in accordance with the resolution of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, there are in Korea: 65 naval craft at the port of Seisin, including torpedo boats, anti-submarine craft and other vessels, 2 naval units at the port of Genzan and 6 at the port of Rasin. There are 3,530 [Soviet military] personnel, plus 264 civilians. In the cities of Seisin, Kanko, Ranan and Pyongyang there are various technical groups, mostly workers in communications, totalling 326 persons. In addition, there are 239 military advisers." (AVP RF, Fond 7, Opis 22, Delo 235, Papka 37.) The naval presence at Seisin was to be temporary, as stipulated in one of the agreements signed by the DPRK and USSR in Moscow in March 1949.

⁵⁶ The texts of these agreements are found in AVP RF, Fond 07, Opis 22, Delo 234, Papka 37, and AVP RF, Fond 17, Opis 22, Delo 238, Papka 37.

⁵⁷ On 18 April 1949, N. Fedorenko sent Vyshinsky a draft of a telegram to Shtykov in Pyongyang communicating to him that the agreements should not be widely discussed or published in the press. AVP RF, Fond 07, Opis 22, Delo 234, Papka 37.

the credit agreement and how much must be paid up front. It should also be noted that the amounts of all the commodities were calculated in terms of their cost in American dollars.⁵⁸

One of the commodities the Soviet Union obtained from North Korea, a mineral called monazite, is perhaps of particular significance to an investigation of Soviet aims in Korea. Monazite is a black sand that contains small amounts of thorium, a radioactive material that can be used in the production of atomic bombs. Soviet officials investigated the exploitation of monazite deposits in North Korea from the beginning of the occupation period in 1945, and samples of the deposits were brought to the USSR.⁵⁹ It is not clear how significant a role monazite played in Soviet supplies of radioactive materials, but the United States considered it important enough to try to prevent Soviet acquisition of the metal. In 1944 U.S. officials began a program to control thorium supplies on a world scale in order to keep the substance from the Soviet Union, an effort which continued into the early 1950s.⁶⁰ Perhaps in order to counter this American effort, during the trade negotiations of March 1949 General Shtykov wrote to Stalin that he considered it “necessary to take measures to increase the export from North Korea to the USSR of concentrates of monazite, tantalum, niobium and to begin the export of uranic ore. For this purpose, I ask your orders to corresponding Soviet organizations about aiding the Korean government in the development of deposits and in the organization of the extraction of concentrate and the mining of the above indicated rare metals.”⁶¹

Discussions among Soviet officials about the construction of the railway from the Kraskino Primorsky railway in the Soviet Far East to the Khonio station of the North Korean railroad give another indication of the role North Korea played in Soviet strategic thinking. In December 1948, Gromyko wrote to Molotov that he agreed with Shtykov’s and Tunkin’s opinions about building this railroad. He explained that

the construction of this line was provided for by the resolution of the Council of Ministers of 26 June 1948, but the dates of construction were not indicated. Because of limitations in means for the plan of capital expenditures, Beshchev (MPS) [*Ministerstvo Putei Soobscheniia*, or Ministry of Transport] raised questions about beginning construction work no earlier than 1950. Despite the

⁵⁸ See the record of the trade discussions held on 11, 14, and 18 March 1949 in AVP RF, Fond 7, Opis 22, Delo 233, Papka 37.

⁵⁹ General Shtykov to Stalin, 12 March 1949, AVP RF, Fond 07, Opis 22a, Delo 223, Papka 14, l. 1-2.

⁶⁰ See Jonathan E. Helmreich, *Gathering Rare Ores: The Diplomacy of Uranium Acquisition, 1943-1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 45-48, 160, 164, 174, 249-56; and Gregg Herken, *The Winning Weapon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 14, 101-2, 108-10.

⁶¹ Shtykov to Stalin, 12 March 1949, AVP RF, Fond 07, Opis 22a, Delo 223, Papka 14, l. 2. On 31 October 1949, Gromyko and Menshikov wrote to Stalin (*osobaia papka*) that Shtykov communicated on October 27 that Kim Il Sung had raised with him the possibility of increasing the rate of extraction of monazite concentrate for delivery to the USSR in partial payment for military equipment and arms, from the 500 tons stipulated for 1950 in the March 1949 agreement to 20,000 tons. They advised agreeing with the Korean proposal. AVP RF, Fond 07, Opis 22a, Delo 223, Papka 14, l. 6-7.

difficulties that MPS is experiencing with allocations for the indicated goal, MID supports beginning construction in 1949 because of the political and military-strategic considerations in connection with our relations with North Korea. In deciding on the dates of construction, we must note that the Americans are building railroads everywhere their troops are located. One must suppose that South Korea will not be an exception in this regard. In such conditions, a North Korean lag in railroad construction is clearly extremely undesirable.⁶²

In late 1948, therefore, the Soviet government apparently viewed the strategic importance of the Korean peninsula in essentially the same way as it had in June 1945, as a potential staging ground for aggressive actions against the Soviet Far East. Given the impossibility of establishing a “friendly” government for the entire country, Moscow sought to protect Soviet security by maintaining a compliant government in power in the northern half of the country and shoring up the military strength of that client state.

The archival record clearly shows that despite the withdrawal of Soviet troops from North Korea, in 1949 and 1950 Soviet officials continued to maintain close supervision over events there. Among the many examples of this control is a letter written on 19 March 1949 to Molotov and Vyshinsky by General Shtykov, who became the Soviet ambassador to Pyongyang following the establishment of the DPRK in September 1948. The letter enumerated the measures Shtykov considered advisable to carry out in Korea following the conclusion of the March 1949 agreements. These included staging mass rallies, organizing speeches at the rallies, in the press, and on radio, and advising Kim Il Sung to speak about the agreements at a series of sessions of the Supreme People’s Assembly of Korea to be held in April of the following year.⁶³

Another example of Soviet control is a report of a 27 August 1949 meeting between Pak Hon-yong, the DPRK Foreign Minister, and G.I. Tunkin of the Soviet Embassy. The meeting was held at Pak’s request in order to inform Tunkin, among other things, that the Chinese had asked the DPRK to send an additional 8-10 kilowatts of electricity from the Supun plant. Tunkin recommended that the North Koreans do everything possible to satisfy the Chinese request. Pak replied that he would communicate this to Kim Il Sung and draft a resolution to this effect.⁶⁴ Likewise, the text of the appeal for peaceful unification issued by the Presidium of the Supreme

⁶² Gromyko to Molotov, 22 December 1948, AVP RF, Fond 07, Opis 21, Delo 318, Papka 22. Gromyko asked Molotov to send the attached decision to the Council of Ministers if he agreed. In an indication of the financial limitations the Soviet Union faced at this time, the draft of this decision specified that the Koreans will build the portion of the railroad located on their territory.

⁶³ AVP RF, Fond 17, Opis 22, Delo 238, Papka 37.

⁶⁴ Tunkin to Gromyko and Vyshinsky at Foreign Ministry, 27 August 1949, AVP RF, Fond 7, Opis 22, Delo 232, Papka 37.

People's Assembly of the DPRK to the National Assembly of South Korea on 19 June 1950 was first sent to Moscow for approval.⁶⁵

In other words, that the North Koreans had their own goals, and were not simply “puppets” of Moscow in the Cold War sense of that phrase, does not mean that the Soviet Union did not attempt to control events in North Korea. The orthodox/revisionist argument on the issue of Soviet control over client states is, at least in this case, a false dichotomy. As will be shown below, the North Korean leadership developed its own plans for the reunification of the country and it is clearly incorrect to suggest that the North Koreans attacked the South in June 1950 because Stalin ordered them to do so. At the same time, however, revisionists are in error in attempting to make the case for North Korean agency by arguing that Moscow was not integrally involved in decision-making in Pyongyang. The Soviet leadership maintained close supervision over events in North Korea, and for political and material reasons, the DPRK could not implement its reunification plan without Soviet support. It was the intersection of Moscow's and Pyongyang's aims that produced the war in June 1950.

In the spring of 1950 Stalin's policy toward Korea took an abrupt turn. During meetings with Kim Il Sung in Moscow in April,⁶⁶ Stalin approved Kim's plan to reunify the country by military means and agreed to provide the necessary supplies and equipment for the operation. The plan to launch the assault on South Korea was Kim's initiative, not Stalin's. The Soviet leader finally agreed to support the undertaking only after repeated requests from Kim. Furthermore, Stalin's purpose was not to test American resolve; on the contrary, he approved the plan only after having been assured that the United States would not intervene. The documentary evidence for these conclusions comes from a highly classified internal history of the Korean War written in 1966 by staff of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, apparently for the purpose of providing

⁶⁵ On 14 June 1950 Gromyko sent to Stalin for his approval an instruction to the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang to “communicate to Korean friends that with regard to the draft of the appeal of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK to the National Assembly of South Korea there are no remarks.” Copies were sent to Molotov, Malenkov, Beria, Mikoyan, Kaganovich, and Bulganin. AVP RF, Fond 07, Opis 23a, Delo 250, Papka 20. According to the 1966 Soviet Foreign Ministry document discussed below, this appeal was part of the three-stage plan for the invasion of South Korea worked out jointly by the DPRK and USSR. The political importance to the Soviets of this appeal is reflected in the list of persons who received copies of Gromyko's note to Stalin.

⁶⁶ Gavril Korotkov has stated that in an interview he conducted, Gen. Nikolai Lomov, chief of the Far Eastern Department of the Soviet General Staff, stated that during a trip to Moscow in February 1950, Kim Il Sung was severely reprimanded by Stalin for reporting that he was not yet ready to invade the South and ordered him to be ready to invade by May. The implication of this recollection is that the invasion was Stalin's initiative, a plan he forced on Kim. However, several memoir accounts by North Koreans, as well as the 1966 Soviet Foreign Ministry report, indicate that the plan to invade was Kim's initiative and that Stalin approved it only after persistent appeals from the North Korean leader. Furthermore, no hard evidence has emerged to suggest that Kim met with Stalin in February 1950; the documentary evidence thus far available shows that Kim arrived in Moscow on March 31 and stayed through April. It is possible that a conversation such as Lomov described took place during Kim's April visit, after Stalin had given his approval, and was an effort by Stalin to impress on Kim that if the Soviet Union was going to support this campaign, Kim had better be fully prepared militarily. It is, of course, also possible that Korotkov referred to a previously undocumented February 1950 meeting.

background information for Soviet officials who were at that time discussing with Chinese and Vietnamese officials possible Soviet aid to North Vietnam in its battle with the United States. This document gives the following account of the events leading up to the onset of the war:

After separate elections in 1948 in South Korea and the formation of the puppet government of Rhee Syngman, on the one hand, and the formation of the DPRK, on the other, relations between the North and the South of the country were sharply aggravated. The Seoul regime, as well as the DPRK, declared its claim to be the authority in all of Korea. The situation at the 38th parallel became even more tense in 1948 after the withdrawal of Soviet and American troops from Korea.

During this period, Kim Il Sung and other Korean leaders were firmly determined to unify the country by military means, without devoting the necessary attention to studying the possibility that existed at that time for peaceful reunification through the broad development of the democratic movement in South Korea.

In the DPRK, a people's army was created which in manpower and equipment significantly surpassed the armed forces of South Korea. By January 1, 1950, the total number of DPRK troops was 110,000; new divisions were hastily being formed.

Calculating that the USA would not enter a war over South Korea, Kim Il Sung persistently pressed for agreement from Stalin and Mao Zedong to reunify the country by military means. (telegrams #4-51, 233, 1950).

Stalin at first treated the persistent appeals of Kim Il Sung with reserve, noting that "such a large affair in relation to South Korea... needs much preparation," but he did not object in principle. The final agreement to support the plans of the Koreans was given by Stalin at the time of Kim Il Sung's visit to Moscow in March-April 1950. Following this, in May, Kim Il Sung visited Beijing and secured the support of Mao.

The Korean government envisioned realizing its goal in three stages:

- 1) concentration of troops near the 38th parallel
- 2) issuing an appeal to the South for peaceful unification
- 3) initiating military activity after the South's rejection of the proposal for peaceful unification.

At Stalin's order, all requests of the North Koreans for delivery of arms and equipment for the formation of additional units of the KPA were quickly met. The Chinese leadership sent to Korea a division formed from Koreans who had been serving in the Chinese army, and promised to send food aid and to transfer one army closer to Korea "in case the Japanese enter on the side of South Korea."(telegram 362, 1950)

By the end of May 1950 the General Staff of the KPA together with Soviet military advisers announced the readiness of the Korean army to begin concentration at the 38th parallel. At the insistence of Kim Il Sung, the beginning of military activity was scheduled for June 25, 1950. (telegram 408, 1950)

By the time of the attack, the North Korean armed forces had significant superiority over the South Koreans. The correlation of forces between South and

North Korea was as follows: in number of troops 1:2; number of guns 1:2; machine-guns 1:7; sub-machine guns, 1:13; tanks 1:6.5; planes 1:6. The operational plan of the KPA envisioned that Korean troops would advance 15-20 kilometers per day and would in the main complete military activity within 22-27 days. (telegram 468, 1950)⁶⁷

We see, therefore, that Kim waited until he had Soviet support before launching the attack on the South and that this support was substantial. In addition to the delivery of arms and ammunition, the Soviet Union sent military advisors experienced in large-scale campaigns to draft the battle plan. According to Yu Song-chol, a retired DPRK lieutenant general who translated the operational plan in 1950, shortly after Kim returned to Korea, “a dispatch authorizing an invasion of the south came down from the Soviet Union. The Soviets afterwards began a complete changeover of personnel in May 1950, replacing the military advisers who had been dispatched to North Korea with individuals with extensive combat experience. Lieutenant General Bashilev, a hero of the German-Soviet war, replaced Major General Smirnov as the head of the military advisory group. The draft plan for the 6-25 (June 25) southern invasion was prepared directly by this Soviet military advisory group. Its title was ‘Preemptive Strike Operational Plan.’ After the plan was handed over to Kim Il Sung, he passed it on to Kang Kon, the chief of the General Staff of the KPA, who in turn passed it on to me. Kan instructed, ‘Translate this into Korean and formulate a plan.’ That was in early May 1950.”⁶⁸

Memoir accounts provide further information about Kim’s appeal to Stalin for support. Khrushchev records that during the April visit Kim attempted to persuade Stalin that Korea could be united quickly through a military campaign, since an invasion of the south would set off a popular uprising against the southern regime. According to Khrushchev, Stalin was worried that the Americans would intervene but other Soviet officials thought this could be avoided through a

⁶⁷ Foreign Ministry background report, author(s) not indicated, “On the Korean War, 1950-1953, and the Armistice Negotiations,” 9 August 1966, Storage Center for Contemporary Documentation (post-1952 Central Committee Archive), Fond 5, Opis 58, Delo 266, 1. 122-131. The telegrams cited in this report have not yet been declassified, and we will, of course, have firmer evidence when we are able to see the telegrams themselves. However, since the information about the planning and initiation of the North Korean attack on South Korea so flatly contradicts official Soviet statements, we can conclude that these citations are correct. It would have been impossible for the authors of this report to have contradicted so baldly the often repeated Soviet line on such a sensitive subject unless their citations were clearly true. For additional excerpts from and analysis of this document, see Kathryn Weathersby, “New Findings on the Korean War,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 3 (Fall 1993).

⁶⁸ “Yu Song-chol’s Testimony Part 8,” FBIS-EAS-90-249 (27 December 1990), 26. The evidence is persuasive that the battle plan used for the invasion of South Korea was drafted by Soviet advisers. However, that does not mean that the invasion was a “Soviet war plan” in the sense that David Rees meant in his 1964 account. (See footnote six.) Even though Soviet military advisers drafted the invasion plan, the invasion was not, as Rees and other orthodox accounts claimed, an aggressive Soviet initiative, undertaken in order to expand the territory under Soviet control.

rapid victory. Stalin allegedly then asked Mao's opinion, and the Chinese leader approved Kim's plan.⁶⁹

A retired brigadier general of the DPRK, Chung Sang-chin, in an interview in 1992, explained that according to the report of Mun Il, Kim's translator on the trip to Moscow, Kim Il Sung made four points to persuade Stalin that the United States would not participate in the war. First, it would be a decisive surprise attack and the war would be won in three days; second, there would be an uprising of 200,000 communist party members in South Korea; third, the guerrillas in the southern provinces would support the KPA; and fourth, the US would not have time to participate. Chung also said that the Acheson speech was known and "produced a certain influence on Kim Il Sung."⁷⁰

The reference in the 1966 document to the North Korean leadership's determination to unify the country by military means "without devoting the necessary attention to studying the possibility that existed at that time for peaceful reunification through the broad development of the democratic movement in South Korea" appears to be an indication of Soviet displeasure with Kim over the U.S. intervention. Soviet criticism of Kim for failing to pursue peaceful methods of reunification, a line which began soon after the American entry into the war, was a veiled way of holding Kim responsible for the negative consequences the Soviet Union suffered as a result of the U.S. intervention.

The Soviet reaction to the U.S. intervention in Korea in June 1950 and the pattern of subsequent Soviet intervention in the war also indicate that Stalin was surprised and alarmed by the U.S. response and extremely reluctant to confront the United States militarily over Korea. First, the Foreign Ministry had no reply to an American intervention prepared by June 25. Gromyko sent the first draft of the Soviet statement on the American intervention to Stalin on July 2, a full week after the beginning of the war.⁷¹ Second, Soviet authorities immediately took steps to avoid engaging the American forces. On June 26, Soviet ships that had sailed from Dairen were ordered "to return to their own defense zone immediately" and throughout the war Soviet naval vessels stayed clear of the war zone.⁷² Third, in an attempt to distance itself from the conflict, the Soviet government refused to approve the fervent requests of Soviet citizens of

⁶⁹ Strobe Talbott, ed. and trans., *Khrushchev Remembers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), 367-68.

⁷⁰ Unpublished interview on 13 April 1992, with Sergei Goncharov, John Lewis and Xue Litai, for their forthcoming book *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao and the Korean War* (Stanford University Press, 1993). I am indebted to Sergei Goncharov for providing a copy of this interview.

⁷¹ Note from Gromyko to Stalin, with draft statement attached, 2 July 1950. AVP RF, Fond 07, Opis 23a, Delo 251, Papka 20. The statement, which was issued on July 4, was jointly written by Gromyko and Molotov. It is a long and relatively moderate statement that reflects real concerns over American actions in the Far East.

⁷² Cumings, *Origins of the Korean War*, vol. II, 643-44, citing British, Nationalist Chinese, and American intelligence reports.

Korean nationality to join their fellow Koreans in defending their homeland against “the barbarous attack by the American imperialists.”⁷³

Finally, when the course of the war turned against the DPRK in the wake of the American landing at Inchon, the Soviet Union refused to intervene in order to defend its client state.⁷⁴ When Stalin at last sent military forces to Korea he did so only in support of Chinese forces, to whom he was bound by a mutual defense treaty. After first backing down from his promise to Mao to provide air support for Chinese troops crossing the Yalu,⁷⁵ Stalin finally sent two air force divisions to defend the Yalu river bridges in November 1950, and by March 1951 a division from the Moscow Air Defense District began to arrive in Manchuria.⁷⁶ This intervention was made a state secret⁷⁷ and extraordinary measures were taken to maintain this secrecy. Soviet aircraft carried North Korean markings and the Russian pilots wore Chinese uniforms. The pilots were even ordered to speak Korean in their radio communications.⁷⁸ During the spring of 1951, the Soviet involvement grew much larger and Soviet pilots engaged in intensive air combat with American fighters.⁷⁹ However, throughout the war, Soviet pilots were prohibited from flying over enemy-held territory so that they would not be taken prisoner if shot down.⁸⁰

Chinese participants in the discussions between the PRC and USSR over Chinese entry into the war also report that Stalin was extremely reluctant to risk a military clash with the United

⁷³ Nam Dian Chun conveyed an offer to mobilize Korean youth in the USSR in a letter to Suslov at the Central Committee, 8 July 1950, RTsKhIDNI, Fond 17, Opis 137, Delo 409, 1. 134-135. On 9 August 1950, Ia. Lomakin, Deputy Chairman of the Foreign Policy Commission of the Central Committee, informed Suslov that Nam’s request was refused “in light of the fact at the present time Soviet citizens are not being sent to Korea.” RTsKhIDNI, Fond 17, Opis 137, Delo 409, 11. 108-109. Thirty-seven Korean students at various Leningrad institutes asked to be sent to fight in Korea in a letter to Malenkov at the Central Committee on 15 December 1950; L. Chernov wrote to Malenkov on 24 February 1951 that no action had been taken on their request. RTsKhIDNI, Fond 17, Opis 137, Delo 409, 11. 136-139.

⁷⁴ At the same time, however, Stalin followed very closely the progress of the war, issuing detailed tactical instructions to the Soviet military advisers in North Korea. See two telegrams from Stalin to Shtykov and Matveev, late September 1950 and 1 October 1950, published in the Russian journal *Rodina* 4 (1993), 79-81. For an examination of Soviet policy during the Korean War see my forthcoming article in *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* (Winter 1993/94).

⁷⁵ Chen Jian, “The Sino-Soviet Alliance and China’s Entry into the Korean War,” 29-30; Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai, “China’s Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited,” 111.

⁷⁶ Steven J. Zaloga, “The Russians in MiG Alley,” *Air Force Magazine* 74:2 (Feb 1991), 76.

⁷⁷ See interview with Lt. Col. Aleksandr Smorchkov, Moscow International Broadcast Service in Korean, 11 June 1990, translated in FBIS-SOV-90-121 (22 June 1990), 9-10.

⁷⁸ This order was, naturally, impossible to follow. Later in the war the Soviets abandoned this rule and Soviet planes also began to carry Soviet insignia. Interview with Lt. Gen. Georgi Lobov, “Blank Spots of History: In the Skies of North Korea,” JPRS Report, JPRS-UAC-91-003 (3 July 1991), 5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 5. Lobov, who commanded the 64th Corps, estimated that from 1952 until the end of the war in 1953, the corps numbered about 26,000 personnel. There were three fighter aviation divisions, two anti-aircraft artillery divisions, one aviation technical division, and three independent regiments: a night fighter regiment, a naval fighter aviation regiment, and a searchlight regiment. Soviet personnel also operated two base hospitals and various other small support units near the Yalu River.

⁸⁰ Jerrold L. Schecter with Vyacheslav V. Luchkov, ed. and trans., *Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), 146.

States over Korea. Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai report that “after MacArthur’s Inchon landing, when the situation became completely unfavorable to Kim, Stalin immediately became pessimistic. He believed that the U.N. forces’ advance could in no way be checked unless the Soviet Union directly intervened. However, that was the last thing he wished to do. He even angrily rejected Khrushchev’s suggestion of sending a Russian general to organize an effective resistance. He would not run the risk of a direct Soviet-U.S. military confrontation. Yet, he did not want to lose North Korea either. When Stalin was told, on October 2, of Mao’s decision to send troops to Korea to help Kim, he was most happy that the Chinese had helped to solve his dilemma.”⁸¹

It is clear, therefore, that Stalin’s support of the North Korean plan to reunify the country through a rapid military assault on the South was not given in order to test American resolve. Just the opposite was true; it was only given after Stalin was persuaded that the action would not risk conflict with the United States. The question then remains, why did Stalin take this risk, which was such a sharp departure from his earlier cautious policy in Northeast Asia?

We see, first of all, that Soviet officials were well aware that conflict was likely to break out at any moment between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea. The Foreign Ministry received a steady stream of reports of South Korean officials’ frequent declarations of their readiness and determination to reunify their country through military force.⁸² Moscow also received reports of troop movements and fighting along the 38th parallel.⁸³ Stalin’s support of Kim’s plan to initiate this war could thus be seen as a preemptive strike, an attempt to make use of a temporary advantage in “the correlation of forces” to resolve an inevitable conflict in a favorable way. June 1950 was a propitious time for an attack on South Korea because earlier that year the military capability of the DPRK had been significantly enhanced by the return to North Korea of 14,000

⁸¹ Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai, “China’s Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited,” 109.

⁸² See, for example, TASS report to MID on 31 October 1949, of Syngman Rhee’s declaration to American sailors at Inchon that “if we are forced to resolve this problem on the battlefield, then we will do all that is required”: AVP RF, Fond Arkhivno-spravochnaia biblioteka, Opis 18, Delo 6, Papka 1; Shtykov report to Gromyko, 12 January 1950, of Rhee’s press conference statement of 30 December 1949, that “while we have pursued a peaceful policy in cooperation with the peaceful policy of the US and the UN, in the new year, in relation to changes in the international situation, we must unite South and North Korea through our own efforts”: AVP RF, Fond 102, Opis 10, Delo 15, Papka 12; Shtykov’s report of 9 February 1950, of the ROK Defense Minister’s statement that “we are in full readiness for the struggle to restore the lost territory and we wait only for orders”; his statement that “if we seize Pyongyang and Wonsan, then the line of defense against communism will gradually move to the north” was underlined by the reader at MID: AVP RF, Fond 102, Opis 10, Delo 15, Papka 12; TASS report to MID on 1 March 1950, of Rhee’s statement at a rally in Seoul that “the hour for unification of Korea is drawing near”; Rhee promised to unify the country “even though several of our friends across the seas tell us that we must not think about an attack on the foreign puppet which is stifling the freedom of our people in the north”: AVP RF, Fond Arkhivno-spravochnaia biblioteka, Opis 18, Delo 6, Papka 1.

⁸³ Report to Molotov, 14 April 1949, from Counter-Espionage Department of MGB regarding concentrations of ROK troops along the 38th parallel, AVP RF, Fond 06, Opis 11a, Delo 55, Papka 26; report from Shtykov to Gromyko, 17 October 1949, about incidents along the 38th parallel, AVP RF, Fond 1 DVO, Opis 9, Delo 12, Papka 8.

Korean communists who had fought with the Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese civil war.⁸⁴ The example of the CCP's victory in its struggle against another unpopular, reactionary regime supported by the United States also strengthened morale among North Korean communists, encouraging them to believe that they would be similarly victorious.⁸⁵

However, the factors stated above were not strong enough to overcome Stalin's fear of directly confronting the United States. We know from the example of the Greek civil war, among others, that at this time Stalin was quite willing to allow a foreign communist party to lose its bid for power if he concluded that Soviet interests would be harmed by direct involvement in the conflict.⁸⁶ Stalin's decision to support the risky venture in Korea must therefore have been motivated by significant strategic concerns. The documents that will provide conclusive evidence of Stalin's motives have not yet been declassified, but from information gained from recently published memoirs, it appears that Stalin's insecurity about his relations with Mao Zedong and about Soviet relations with the PRC led him to approve Kim Il Sung's reunification plan.

As is well known, since the mid 1920s Stalin's policies toward the Chinese Communist Party had done more to hinder CCP victory than to aid it. In June 1949 Stalin admitted as much to the CCP delegation in Moscow.⁸⁷ That Mao achieved victory on his own, combined with the size and importance of China, gave him a much stronger position vis-a-vis Moscow than that of any European communist leader. Speaking to Liu's delegation in Moscow in 1949, Stalin spoke of "the fact that the Soviet people and the peoples of Europe should learn from your experience. . . . Owing to the arrogance of the leaders of the revolutionary movement in Western Europe, the social democratic movement in the West began to fall behind in its development following the death of Marx and Engels. The center of the revolution moved from West to East, and now it is moving to China and East Asia. . . . It is possible that in comprehending general problems of Marxist theory, we, the Soviet people, are somewhat stronger than you. However, with regard to the application of Marxist principles in practice, we can learn from the great amounts of experience you possess."⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Nie Rongzhen, *Nie Rongzhen huijilu* (The Memoirs of Nie Rongzhen) (Beijing: The Press of the People's Liberation Army, 1984), 744.

⁸⁵ On 2 July 1950, Pak Hon-yong, the KDPR Foreign Minister, stated that "after the war the U.S. began trying to turn the Pacific Ocean into an American lake and the people of the Pacific Ocean countries into slaves of American monopoly. However, the strengthening of the forces of the democratic camp, the rise of the national liberation movement in the countries of Asia and especially, the great victory of the Chinese people broke into smithereens the perfidious intentions of the American imperialists." AVP RF, Fond 102, Opis 10, Delo 10, Papka 11.

⁸⁶ For a detailed examination of Soviet policy toward the Greek civil war, see Peter J. Stavrakis, *Moscow and Greek Communism, 1944-1949* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁸⁷ Shi Zhe, "I Accompanied Mao to the Soviet Union" *Renwu* (Biographical Journal) 2, (1988, 6), 8, cited in Chen Jian, "The Sino-Soviet Alliance and China's Entry into the Korean War," 10.

⁸⁸ S.N. Goncharov, "Stalin's Dialogue with Mao Zedong," *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 10:4 (Winter 1991-92), 59. This article is an interview with I.V.Kovalev, Stalin's representative in China and interpreter in meetings with representatives of the CCP.

Stalin even went so far as to state that the CCP should not subordinate itself to the CPSU and should not join the Cominform, but instead should form an alliance of East Asian communist parties.⁸⁹ According to the memoir of Mao's interpreter, Stalin told Liu Shaoqi that "he hoped to see the Chinese and the Soviets divide their spheres of responsibilities within the international communist movement. . . . As the Chinese had greater influence upon colonial and semi-colonial countries in the East, it would be easier for China to help promote Eastern revolution than for the Soviet Union."⁹⁰

These statements should not be taken at face value, of course, but they do indicate that in 1949-50 Stalin was involved in a delicate power game with Mao. As Stalin's representative in China, I.V. Kovalev, put it, "at the end of 1948, when the prospects of a military victory of the CPC [Communist Party of China] finally became clear, both leaders in all likelihood understood completely that they would have to meet in order to work out a mutual agreement regarding their relations. From this moment on there began a process of mutually active shifting and probing of each other's positions on key questions."⁹¹ Stalin's humiliation of Mao upon the latter's arrival in Moscow in December 1949, leaving him in isolation and refusing to see him for the first month of his visit,⁹² also testifies to this power play. This was classic "strong man" posturing toward a potential rival; its purpose was to leave no doubt as to who was in charge.

Stalin's relationship with Mao affected his decision regarding Korea because if Stalin were to refuse to support Kim Il Sung's perfectly reasonable goal of reunifying his country, which was comparable to what Mao had just accomplished in China, then Stalin would again be open to the charge of hindering the cause of revolution in the East. His position as the leader of the communist camp would be weakened while the authority and prestige of Mao, to whom Kim would obviously turn and who had a blood debt to support the Korean communists, would rise.

More important than the above concern, however, was apparently Stalin's fear that the PRC would not long ally itself with the Soviet Union. A Russian scholar who has seen the relevant documents has recounted to me that Stalin calculated that even though the United States might not defend the ROK, once it lost South Korea it would not then allow itself to suffer the additional loss of Taiwan. The United States would move in to protect Chiang Kai-shek, thereby preventing a rapprochement between the US and the PRC. Mao would thus be forced to continue to turn to the Soviet Union for economic and military aid. We can test this explanation of Stalin's motives only after the 1950 documents have been declassified, but from what is now known, it

⁸⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁹⁰ Shi Zhe, "Random Reflections of Comrade Liu Shaoqi," *Geming huiyilu* (Revolutionary Memoirs), supplementary issue, No. 1 (October 1983), 110-11; Shi Zhe, "I Accompanied Chairman Mao to the Soviet Union," 10, cited in Jian Chen "The Sino-Soviet Alliance and China's Entry into the Korean War," 12.

⁹¹ Goncharov, "Stalin's Dialogue with Mao Zedong," 68.

⁹² Ibid., 71-72.

appears quite plausible. Stalin knew the Soviet Union could never match American terms for aid; Soviet negotiations with the PRC over the agreements signed in February 1950 had been as much a matter of haggling over every penny as had been the negotiations with the DPRK,⁹³ and the pact ultimately concluded was on terms economically unfavorable to the PRC.⁹⁴ Stalin knew that Mao had both political and economic reasons for turning away from an alliance with the Soviet Union, and preventing the huge communist state in East Asia from becoming independent of Moscow would have been a sufficiently strong motive for the Soviet leader to risk approving military action in Korea.

In conclusion, although many questions about Soviet policy toward Korea from 1945-1950 remain unanswered, the evidence now available indicates that the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950 was not the result of Soviet determination to expand the territory under its control, and it was certainly not the opening salvo in a broader Soviet attack on the American sphere of influence. From 1945 to early 1950, Moscow's aim was not to gain control over the Korean peninsula. Instead, the Soviet Union sought to protect its strategic and economic interests through the traditional Tsarist approach of maintaining a balance of power in Korea. However, in the context of the postwar Soviet-American involvement on the peninsula, such a balance could only be maintained by prolonging the division of the country, retaining effective control over the northern half.

The North Korean attempt to reunify the country through a military campaign clearly represented a sharp departure from the basic Soviet policy toward Korea. The initiative for this departure came from Pyongyang, not Moscow. In the spring of 1950 Stalin approved Kim's reunification plan and provided the necessary military support, but only after repeated appeals from Kim and only after having been persuaded that the United States would not intervene in the conflict. Conclusive evidence of Stalin's reasons for finally supporting the North Korean reunification plan has not yet been released, but it appears that Stalin's motive may well have been to tie the Chinese communists more firmly to the USSR, to prevent a rapprochement between the PRC and the United States. If this interpretation is correct, it means that it was Soviet weakness that drove Stalin to support the attack on South Korea, not the unrestrained expansionism imagined by the authors of NSC-68.

⁹³ The extensive records of these USSR-PRC negotiations can be found in AVP RF, Fond 07, Opis 23a, Delo 235 and 249, and Opis 23g, Delo 16.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Kang Chao and Feng-hwa Mah, "A Study of the Ruble-Yuan Exchange Rate," *China Quarterly* 17 (January-March 1964), 192-204.

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