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**Stalin's Foreign Policy "Shift": Cautious Expansionism, USSR-DPRK Relations
1945 - 1950 and the Origins of the Korean War**

By

Jacob Shuster

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Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
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Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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**Stalin's Foreign Policy "Shift": Cautious Expansionism, USSR-DPRK Relations
1945 - 1950 and the Origins of the Korean War**

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ABSTRACT

Despite initially denying Kim IL Sung's requests for a military reunification in 1949, Josef Stalin decided to support an invasion of South Korea in 1950. This paper explores the origins of the Korean War and the roles of both the Soviet Civil Administration and Kim IL Sung in convincing Stalin that the invasion was necessary, and that it would be neither prolonged, nor involve American interference. Throughout the initial occupation of North Korea, Stalin preferred to maintain the status quo on the peninsula, as he was open to, but deeply suspicious of plans for reunification and restrained Kim's ambitions. However, both the SCA and Kim manipulated Stalin and played off both his fears of a southern led invasion, and potentially losing a communist ally to China. By 1949 Stalin had already been convinced by them of the necessity for a military reunification and cautiously approved Kim's plans.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Korean War has seen both a reinvigorated resonance due to the on-going release of archival documents, as well as a fresh immediacy due to renewed tensions on the peninsula and Russia's attempts to restore and strengthen relations with North Korea. Of all the actors in Korea's political history however, the Soviet Union has received the least attention by Western historians, who have tended to concentrate on the American, Chinese and Korean roles on the peninsula. Moreover, while the early period of Korea's division has been covered extensively, comparatively few studies have focused on Soviet policy in the region, and until recently have relied on scant Soviet sources. This lack of primary sources caused historians to make conclusions that were generally inferred by the rhetoric of Soviet policy, and as a result, reached drastically varying interpretations. With the declassification of archival documents from the former Soviet Union, beginning in the early 1990's, historians have been given a unique opportunity to reassess many of the events surrounding the division of Korea and the Korean war by integrating new materials, evidence and perspectives into a narrative that had previously been dominated by American sources.

Archival documents now show that prior to 1949, Josef Stalin preferred to maintain the status quo on the Korean peninsula, as he was deeply suspicious of Kim IL Sung's plans for reunification and sought to restrain his ambitions. During 1949 however, both the Soviet Civil Administration (the occupying government of North

Korea established by the USSR) and Kim IL Sung began to manipulate Stalin through reports of growing clashes at the border as well as Kim's "policy of balancing" which played off of Stalin's fears of China's increasing role in the communist movement in Asia. With Stalin convinced that military reunification was inevitable and that the eventual conflict would be neither prolonged, nor involve American interference, Soviet policy began to gradually shift towards cautious expansionism in early 1949. This narrative is a significant departure from the historiography prior to the opening of the archives as it shows that Kim had more agency in the conflict than previously argued. While North Korea was highly dependent on the USSR, Stalin did not have pervasive control over him. Ultimately Stalin relied on Kim and the Soviet Civil Administration (SCA) for information on the peninsula, and they consequently played an extensive role in informing Soviet policy regarding a military invasion. The origins of the Korean War therefore illustrate the balance of power held by the Soviet Union and North Korea, and show that the conflict was a civil war with both strong indigenous and international elements. Kim Il Sung, a politician with large ambitions, enticed the Soviet Union to become heavily involved and help him attempt to gain control over the Korean peninsula. Stalin meanwhile used the peninsula as a battleground to advance his own foreign policy goals and prestige within the communist movement.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This paper will rely on recently declassified primary documents from the period 1945 - 1950, the majority of which have come from Russian archives. The documents have been obtained from the Cold War International History Project

Digital Archive, an initiative established by the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, which has also translated many of the sources into English. While the scope of inquiry has been significantly increased for historians of Soviet-North Korean relations, they are still hampered by the fact that many more, potentially significant, documents have yet to be released. Furthermore, while some North Korean sources have been made available to Western scholars, most notably the captured documents at the National Archives in Washington DC, they are generally limited to government decisions at the provincial levels and below, offering little insight into Kim IL Sung's decision making and relationship with Stalin. Therefore, one of the main, and most obvious, methodological challenges of this paper is the limitation of available documents. However, the material that has been made available is incredibly revealing and has contributed to the wider use of Soviet sources in the historiography. These documents include records of Politburo meetings and decisions, official orders, as well as telegrams, cables and communications between Stalin, Kim IL Sung and high-ranking officials from the USSR and North Korea.

It should also be noted that while many of the revelations made since the partial opening of the Russia archives are not new, they provide further evidence to arguments already deduced from other sources. As historian Andreas Oberender emphasizes, it is unlikely that any new sources from the archives will significantly alter our understanding of Stalin's approach to foreign policy or his relationships

with communist leaders such as Kim IL Sung.¹ Czech historian Voitech Mastny makes a similar assertion, remarking that the “greatest surprise so far to have come from the Russian archives is that there was no surprise”, arguing that the perspectives from the sources seem to conform to what was publicly stated by the Soviet government.² However, though the archival documents may not contain any dramatic surprises or “smoking guns”, their value goes beyond confirmations of arguments already made by historians. These documents offer rare insight into Soviet foreign affairs. As an example, Bulgarian historian Radoslav Yordanov points to the theory of layered policy revealed in the Russian archives.³ This idea, first introduced by Jack Matlock, US Deputy Chief of Mission in Moscow, argues that there was layered bookkeeping in Soviet decision-making, which included policy aimed at public consumption, another aimed at the United States and finally the real policy, which was reflected in Soviet actions and covert operations.⁴ This layered policy is especially evident in the archival documents on Stalin’s foreign policy in North Korea, specifically in documents aimed at alleviating concerns of communist allies abroad. Though this presents another methodological problem for historians, since it is not always apparent when documents reflect actual calculations or simply propaganda meant to mask real intentions, it is beneficial in providing insight into Stalin’s perception of the USSR’s role in Korea, how he wanted to portray it to the

¹ Andreas Oberender, "Stalins Postwar Foreign Policy," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 940

² Voitech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 9

³ Radoslav A. Yordanov, *The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa during the Cold War: Between Ideology and Pragmatism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 15.

⁴ Peter Ruggenthaler, *The Concept of Neutrality in Stalins Foreign Policy, 1945-1953* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 45.

rest of the world, and offers clues into Soviet decision making. Therefore, while the available documents do not contain answers to every question surrounding the origins of the war, they illustrate a clearer picture of Soviet involvement in North Korean nation building, the relationship between the two nations, as well as a glimpse into the motivations behind the actions of both Stalin and Kim IL Sung. These perspectives have been previously non-existent. Therefore, this paper will apply these new sources to the historiographical debate to help add nuance to it. This topic has only been given cursory attention until recently but contains valuable parallels and insights into Russian and North Korean foreign policy today. It also acknowledges the fact that many of these debates cannot be fully put to rest until the further release of documents from Russian and North Korean archives.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

As many scholars have noted, much remains obscure regarding the origins and root causes of the Korean War. Two of the most fundamental questions pertaining to the relations of the Soviet Union and the DPRK ask what kind of role the Soviet Union played in the planning of the invasion before June 25, 1950 and what were Stalin's motives? The second asks to what extent should the conflict be classified as a civil or international war? These two questions are of course interrelated and are at the core of the historiographical debate.

The historiography of the Soviet Union's involvement in the origins of the Korean War has been plagued with, until recently, a lack of primary sources from communist countries, which has resulted in incomplete and widely varying assessments of its role. Furthermore, it has also facilitated the excessively large role

ideology has played in informing these narratives.⁵ This role of ideology generally divided historians into three distinct categories. The orthodox school consists of historians who argued that the Soviet Union's foreign policy was aggressive and expansionist and therefore responsible for the conflicts of the Cold War. The second, revisionist school, placed emphasis on the role of America's aggressive foreign policy. The third school, identified as post-revisionist, arose after the end of the Cold War and introduced a more balanced approach to the narrative. This last school depicted Soviet Foreign policy as pragmatic but opportunistic, while also asserting the existence of an American empire.

Although these schools encompass a broad range of arguments within themselves, they become a useful framework when merged with the various theories of Stalin's foreign policy and Soviet international behavior. Among these theories of Soviet foreign policy, Western historians have generally been divided into three major perspectives, and when applied to Korea, they can be defined as "hegemonic expansionism", "communist fortification" and "cautious expansionism". These theories focus on the role of ideology in Stalin's foreign policy and along with claims about Stalin's motives, are at the core of the competing models. The merging of these elements reveals a dynamic historiographical discussion.

The theory of hegemonic expansionism characterizes the Soviet Union as a power that sought world hegemony and was therefore incompatible with the international community, especially with the United States. Daniel Yergin, an

⁵ Chull-Baum Kim. *The Truth about the Korean War: Testimony 40 Years Later* (Seoul: Eulyoo, 1992), 187.

eminent historian of Soviet foreign policy, has described this view as the “Riga Axiom”, which experts in the United States government generally operated under during the Cold War.⁶ This perspective is uncompromising, illustrating the Soviet Union as a permanent adversary to the US and informed historical narratives by highlighting communist strengths and capabilities instead of weaknesses. A main tenant of this model is the idea that Stalin’s primary motivation for supporting communist revolutions abroad was to secure his role as the leader of communism and acquire global power. Furthermore it imagined communist ideology as playing the most important role in informing Soviet behavior.⁷

This model heavily informs the Orthodox school of thought which arose immediately during and after the events of the Korean War. It is important to note however that due to a lack of primary sources, Orthodox historians’ explanations of Soviet behavior vary dramatically, with many even completely ignoring the USSR in their accounts, or otherwise relegating it to the background and instead placing emphasis on China’s role in the conflict. However, the majority agreed that the invasion of South Korea was part of Stalin’s grand plans. The school did little to establish a well-defined relationship between Stalin and Kim, as Stalin was not only seen as the architect of the war, but as the puppet master of both Kim and North Korea. It depicts Stalin as motivated by the desire to use North Korea as a springboard to communize the rest of Asia, and that they essentially made all the

⁶ Erik Van. Ree, *Socialism in One Zone: Stalins Policy in Korea, 1945-1947* (Oxford: Berg, 1989), 9.

⁷Adam B. Ulam, "Soviet Ideology and Soviet Foreign Policy," in *The Conduct of Soviet Foreign Policy*, ed. Erik Peter Hoffmann (New York, NY: Routledge, 1981), 136.

basic political decisions in North Korea.⁸ Therefore, it views the war as international in origin, with the United States reacting to the dominance of the Soviet Union in the peninsula. Although many of the orthodox school's arguments have become either outdated, or largely irrelevant, many have continued to inform more recent debate. Historian Robert Slusser for example, recently argued that Stalin concealed a plan to occupy the entire Korean peninsula for himself, purposely keeping his allies in the dark about his intentions.⁹

The "Communist fortification" theory characterizes Soviet foreign policy as more pragmatic and inherently defensive in nature. In this model, the Soviet Union's foreign policy was wholly motivated by security concerns and was seen to behave as a traditional power within the international system, not one that wanted to overthrow it. In cases where it supported communist revolutions, as in Korea, its main, if not only concern, was the security of the USSR. Therefore, according to the theory, its primary interest in maintaining a friendly regime in North Korea was for it to act as a security buffer. This model therefore did not see it necessary for the Soviet Union to become deeply involved in nation building in Korea or in planning an invasion of South Korea.

This model informed the Revisionist school which arose around the late 1960's, a general period of mistrust in American foreign policy, and reached its peak

⁸ Robert A. Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee, *North Korea: Building of the Monolithic State* (Berwyn, PA: KHU Press, 2017); 17

⁹ 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.

in the 1980's with Bruce Cummings' two massive volumes on the origins of the Korean War. Cummings' theories expanded on earlier works, most notably I.F Stone's *The Hidden History of the Korean War* (1952), and Robert Simmons' *The Strained Alliance* (1975), which attempted to shift blame from the Soviet Union to the United States as well as highlight the civil nature of the conflict.¹⁰ Cummings' arguments detracted significantly from the Orthodox school and were largely an indictment of American involvement in the Korean War. In his assessments, Cummings highlighted Korean agency by arguing that the conflict largely arose from local conflicts among political groups in Korea. Cummings and other Revisionists highly exaggerated the internal factors of the war, although their arguments were integral to the debate as they made substantial contributions to the historiography by demonstrating a significant amount of North Korean agency in the invasion.¹¹

While the school contributed to a broader understanding of the bilateral responsibilities for the conflicts in the Cold War, like the Orthodox school, it did not have the benefit of Soviet archival materials. Without these sources many of its conclusions relied on scant evidence and generally regarded Stalin's actions as reactionary to U.S policies, thus placing emphasis and blame on the United States. The school also generally overemphasized the indigenous elements of the revolution and failed to link them to international factors. Instead, its historians downgraded the Soviet Union's role to that of a pragmatic and unwilling partner or even one that

¹⁰ Robert R. Simmons, *The Strained Alliance: Peking, Pyöngyang, Moscow and the Politics of the Korean Civil War*. (New York: Free Press, 1975), 7

¹¹ William Stueck.. *Rethinking the Korean War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); 28

was minimally involved, such as David Rees who argued that all available evidence suggested that Moscow didn't expect an attack.¹²

The period of détente significantly changed the historiography after the transcripts of tapes recorded by Nikita Khrushchev were published in a memoir in 1970. The memoir recollected several decades of Soviet history and provided a rare inside look into personal conversations with Stalin and secret politburo meetings on the Korean War. The revelations within it led to a major reassessment of the Soviet Union's role in Korea and dealt severe blows to both Orthodox and Revisionist accounts. In the tapes, Khrushchev recounted the origins of the Korean War stating,

For many years we insisted that the initiative for starting the Korean War came from South Korea. Some say there is no need to correct this version of events, because it would be of advantage only to our enemies. I'm telling the truth now for the sake of history: it was the initiative of Comrade Kim Il Sung, and it was supported by Stalin...It was not Stalin's initiative but he supported Kim Il Sung. Although I blame Stalin for all the crimes he committed, on this I am with him.¹³

Khrushchev's recollection was a significant departure from revisionist accounts as well as the official Soviet line, which emphasized that the USSR had no knowledge of the invasion and that the ROK had instigated the conflict. Significantly though, while Khrushchev admitted the Soviet Union's role in the conflict, he placed primary responsibility with Kim IL Sung and the North Koreans, and moreover claimed that Stalin tried to limit Soviet involvement. For the orthodox school, it shifted the

¹² David Rees. *Korea, The Limited War*. (Dehra Dun: Natraj Publishers, 1985), 32

¹³ Khrushchev, Nikita Sergreevich. *Khrushchev Remembers*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1970. 144-145

central figure from Stalin to Kim and for revisionists it showed evidence of Soviet participation and knowledge of the invasion.

Khrushchev's tapes contain inherent biases and issues, and are further hampered by the fact that Stalin, especially in his last years, was highly skeptical and mistrusted even his close associates; therefore it is unlikely that he would have divulged his intentions to his politburo entirely. However, the passages on North Korea are incredibly insightful as they are the only instance where Khrushchev, going against the entire anti-Stalinist tone of the memoir, decided to defend Stalin's actions. Had Khrushchev been motivated simply by protecting the image of the Soviet Union while denouncing Stalin, he would have been far more likely to have taken up the Orthodox account while placing responsibility with the Soviet leader. Nevertheless, for the first time the memoirs provided Western historians with an opportunity to incorporate a Soviet source into their narratives and highlighted the need to incorporate archival evidence from the USSR.

The second shift occurred after the opening of the Soviet archives following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, which provided Western historians with a wealth of formerly classified documents on Soviet decision making in foreign affairs. This broadened access facilitated a shift in the historiography of the Korean War by allowing historians to come to consensus on many debates and investigate the nuances of the relationships between the Soviet Union and the DPRK. It also saw the emergence of the Post-Revisionist school, which in many ways began to synthesize the findings of both the Orthodox, and Revisionist schools. It effectively dismissed

many of the arguments of both schools, providing firm evidence of the far-reaching Soviet involvement on the peninsula, while also showing the cautiousness of Stalin's policies and Kim's independence from him.

This revelation of Stalin's cautious approach promoted the theory of Cautious Expansionism, which was first proposed by Russian historian Vladislav Zubok and later expanded upon by Erik Van Ree. The model is essentially characterized by a more complex duality of expansion and fortification. It understands that Stalin had multiple considerations and motives in his foreign policy and while there is a lot of debate, many historians agree that security issues were among the most significant. The model asserts that Stalin was at times ready to concede to the United States and the international community as his aspirations were generally limited, and he was skeptical of communist revolutions and allies abroad. Furthermore, unlike the Communist Expansionism model which argued ideology fuelled and informed policy, the Cautious Expansionism model admitted that ideological beliefs may have "legitimized, but did not determine, the Kremlin's foreign policy."¹⁴

This model is used by the Post-Revisionist school, which presents a realpolitik approach to Soviet foreign policy and which tends to treat the Korean War in the wider context of decolonization in Asia after the Second World War. It asserts that the Soviet Union primarily saw Korea as just another Japanese property, which could be exploited and looted, but stresses that it did not have any grand

¹⁴ Zubok, Vladislav. "Stalins Plans and Russian Archives." *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 1 (April 1997): 302

operational plans.¹⁵ The main historians within this school include Katheryn Weathersby, Richard Thornton, Andrei Lankov and Charles Armstrong. However their interpretations of primary documents vary greatly and there is little consensus on important questions such as whether Kim was truly a puppet of Stalin, whether Stalin directly micromanaged policies in Korea, or if he gave Terentii Shtykov, head of the SCA, free reign, and what motives he had in approving the invasion of South Korea.

The synthesis of revisionist and orthodox schools has also allowed for more nuanced approaches to Stalin's policies as well as his relationship to Kim which are discussed in more depth in the following chapter. The post-revisionist school is also characterized by its understanding that due to the nature of foreign policy it is impossible to assign a concrete definition to Stalin's policies as they were fluid and changed according to different geopolitical considerations. Finally, the school has a tendency to recognize the conflict as an internationalized civil war and therefore distinctions between its international and civil natures have become largely irrelevant. As Allan R. Millet succinctly states, "[modern] civil wars are seldom, if ever, fought in an international vacuum."¹⁶ Therefore, as the school agrees, it is impossible to isolate international and domestic factors from one another, as civil wars tend to have internal and international dynamics as well as a shifting set of political actors who all have distinct agendas.¹⁷

¹⁵ Millet, "The Korean War" 191

¹⁶ Millett, Allan R. "The Korean War: A 50-Year Critical Historiography." *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 24, no. 1 (March 2001): 193

¹⁷ Millet, "The Korean War," 190

***STALIN'S POST-WAR FOREIGN POLICY AND THE JOINT TRUSTEESHIP ISSUE
(1945)***

In the late 1920's Stalin had adopted his theory of "Socialism in One Country" into Soviet policy, focusing primarily on asserting and expanding his influence within the USSR. By the last years of the Second World War, changes in the Soviet Union's position on the world stage facilitated a renewed interest for him in the revolution abroad, though this was at first focused mainly in Europe.¹⁸ However, due to a multitude of factors including the United States' position in Japan and the Chinese communist revolution, Stalin's attention gradually turned to the Far East. While Stalin had some expansionist goals in Korea, such as the establishment of a warm seaport, he followed a policy of cautious and limited expansion as he was primarily concentrated on socialism within the USSR and relegated the world revolution to the background.¹⁹ This policy was largely influenced by a suspicion of communist revolutions and leaders abroad, and helps explain Stalin's occasional cooperation with the United States such as his decisions on the issue of a joint trusteeship in Korea.

Stalin's decisions to occasionally cooperate with the West are one of the key arguments made by historians who subscribe to the cautious expansionist model of Soviet foreign policy. For example, in his analysis Eric Van Ree points to the Soviet withdrawal in Manchuria and Northern Iran as evidence of Stalin's modest global

¹⁸ Samuel Wells. Jr, "Stalin's Decisions for War in Korea" (presentation, Woodrow Wilson Conference, Washington, D.C, June 6, 2013.)

¹⁹ Samuel Wells. Jr, "Stalin's Decisions for War in Korea" June 6, 2013.

aspirations.²⁰ These limited aspirations also emerge from archival documents which show that Stalin's efforts to expand the Soviet Union's zone of direct military influence were "rare and rather easily checked."²¹ His tendency to acquiesce to the demands of the United States are illustrated when, by the end of 1945 at the Moscow Conference, Stalin agreed to a joint trusteeship on the Korean Peninsula. During the conference, the governments of the United States and the USSR, along with China and the UK pledged to commit to an "agreement concerning a four-power trusteeship of Korea for a period of up to five years."²² Historians tend to have difficulties in explaining Stalin's decision to agree to the trusteeship. Orthodox arguments contend that the Soviet Union was disingenuous in its affirmation of a trusteeship and simply used it as a ploy to lull the United States into a false sense of security.²³ Revisionist historians such as JongSoo Lee are less pessimistic in their approach, suggesting that the Soviet Union was fully supportive of the trusteeship for reasons that included the fact that it "reminded them of an old turn-of-the-century spheres of influence discussion between Imperial Japan and Czarist Russia to divide up the peninsula themselves also at the 38th parallel."²⁴ Archival evidence however points to more pragmatic policy decision-making, which fit within the trends illustrated by the cautious expansionism model. Stalin was sincere in his

²⁰ Erik Van. Ree, *Socialism in One Zone: Stalins Policy in Korea, 1945-1947* (Oxford: Berg, 1989) 7.

²¹ Ree, "Socialism in One Zone", 8.

²² Report of the Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Moscow, December 16-26, 1945. Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library

²³ Lee, Jongsoo. "The Division of Korea and the Rise of Two Koreas, 1945-1948." In *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean History*, edited by Michael J. Seth, (150 - 193) Abingdon: Routledge, 2016; xvi

²⁴ Jongsoo. "The Division of Korea and the Rise of Two Koreas", 173

acceptance of a joint trusteeship, but also hesitant to fully commit to it, as he believed he could potentially gain more on the peninsula. This is evident in Stalin's meeting with the former Premier of the Republic of China T.V. Soong on July 2, 1945, when Stalin made it clear that while he agreed in principle with the trusteeship, he did not agree unilaterally with the decision and had reservations regarding its potential for success.²⁵ As Van Ree argues, Stalin was not enthusiastic about the trusteeship as he suspected the Soviet Union's role could potentially obtain more than one quarter of the peninsula, but "they did not reject it out of hand because they were not prepared to accept an American role in the peninsula."²⁶ Essentially, the agreement was a maneuver to potentially avoid an aggressive US response had the USSR rejected the trusteeship outright. The Soviet Union took on a wait-and-see approach by providing reluctant affirmation and while it was likely not looking to dominate the entire peninsula, it was also hesitant to accept a minority role.

REVOLUTION AND NATION BUILDING: THE SOVIET CIVIL ADMINISTRATION IN NORTH KOREA (1945 - 1946)

Near the final stages of the Asia-Pacific War, local Korean groups had begun preparations for a post-war transition and independence. By mid August 1945, numerous Korean self-government groups or "peoples committees" made up of local activists and political figures emerged throughout the peninsula to fill the vacuum left by the retreating Japanese forces. While the American forces dismantled these

²⁵ "Record of a Meeting between T.V. Soong and Stalin," July 02, 1945, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Victor Hoo Collection, box 6, folder 9, Hoover Institution Archives. Contributed by David Wolff.

²⁶ Erik Van Ree, *Socialism in One Zone: Stalins Policy in Korea, 1945-1947* (Oxford: Berg, 1989) 51.

committees, the Soviet Union decided to use them to their advantage by incorporating them into the Soviet Civil Administration (SCA).²⁷ Established in October 1945, the SCA acted as the occupying government of North Korea and was ostensibly created to oversee the establishment of an independent Korean government. Unfortunately, its real purpose, as well as its structure and the balance of power it held in the initial occupation does not clearly emerge within the existing historiography. Orthodox historians illustrated the SCA as a military government arguing that through it, the Soviet Union had taken immediate control and established a puppet state similar to those throughout Eastern Europe. Accounts such as Korean historian Dae-Sook Suh's for example claim that the Soviet Union virtually dictated its wishes to the North Koreans through its military government immediately after occupation.²⁸ Interestingly however, many other traditional accounts from the period avoided the term "military government" including a US Department of State study in 1950 which claimed, "the Soviet military occupation was not permitted to waste its energies in the morass of military government, using instead selective and covert forms of control while focusing their effort on the creation of a strong indigenous regime."²⁹ These contradictory accounts and debates on the fundamental character of the SCA were further complicated by revisionist accounts, which downplayed its role on the peninsula. Historians such as Cummings and Armstrong for example both argue that the Soviet Union was never

²⁷ Andrej N. Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 12

²⁸ Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 35

²⁹ Erik Van. Ree, *Socialism in One Zone: Stalin's Policy in Korea, 1945-1947* (Oxford: Berg, 1989), 67

able to dominate the local Korean power organs through the SCA.³⁰ Some revisionists also emphasize the cooperation between the Koreans and the USSR, such as Michael Seth who argues that by working with the people's committees the SCA was able to carry out a relatively smooth and peaceful transfer of power.³¹

While archival documents now clearly show that the SCA played a prominent role in effectively controlling North Korea from 1945 until the establishment of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea in 1948, fundamental questions regarding the power balance and its relationship with North Korea still remain. Many post-revisionists have made strong arguments that point to the fact that the Soviet Union failed to establish hegemonic control in the early stages of occupation due mostly to political unpreparedness and the fact that Stalin's ambitions were limited in the region. Moreover, archival documents show that Stalin's focus was quickly concentrated away from the South as the Soviet Union attempted to tighten its grip over the North. While the current consensus among historians has been that the Soviet Union failed to establish immediate hegemonic control, it is unclear to what extent Soviet policy pursued it in the first place. Kathryn Weathersby for instance argues that the Soviet Union sought pervasive control on the peninsula and its policies were carefully calculated and meant to protect its economic and strategic interests through a "traditional Tsarist approach of maintaining a balance of power

³⁰ Cumings, Bruce. *The Origins of the Korean War*. Seoul.: Yuksabipyungsa, 2002; 122; Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution: 1945-1950*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); 38

³¹ Michael J. Seth, *A Concise History of Modern Korea: From the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 36.

in Korea.”³² Weathersby’s assessment regarding the USSR’s motives compliments orthodox accounts as she builds off of earlier assumptions that Soviet policy was firmly rooted in old tsarist interests and approaches.³³ Historians such as Lankov however disagree that there was a clear approach by the Soviet Union or that its policies were grounded in tsarist interests. While Lankov reasserts the Soviet Union’s economic and defense interests in Korea, he emphasizes that the Soviet Union did not have a real plan on the peninsula and instead, at least until 1947, relied on loose control and supervision by its military. According to Lankov, “Soviet policy in Korea was to a very large extent a result of improvisation and ad hoc decisions.”³⁴ Charles Armstrong echoes this claim in assessing that “events in North Korea often ran ahead of Moscow’s plans.”³⁵ A memorandum dated January 11, 1946 to Terentii Shtykov, the head of the Soviet Civil Administration and de-facto leader of North Korea, strongly supports this theory. The memorandum outlines the first several months of Soviet occupation and concludes that the Red Army had little to no control over the territory and was “unfamiliar with army political work and completely inexperienced in questions of political work among a civilian population, particularly a foreign population.”³⁶ According to the document, not only were the

³² Weathersby, Kathryn. “The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Winter 1993), 431

³³ Dae-Sook Suh, Kim Il Sung, 9

³⁴ Andrej N. Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 26

³⁵ Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution: 1945-1950*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 26

³⁶ “Untitled memorandum on the political and morale situation of Soviet troops in North Korea and the economic situation in Korea,” January 11, 1946, History and Public Policy

Soviets ineffective at maintaining power in urban areas, they had no contact with rural district administrations which represented the largest percentage of the population, as they did not “interest themselves in the life and situation of the Korean countryside.”³⁷ This unpreparedness was due to the fact that in the first year of occupation, the Soviet Union saw North Korea simply as a conquered territory to loot and had not yet established a firm policy regarding the peninsula. The fact that the SCA had failed to tap into the rural district administrations also shows a severe miscalculation of the country’s political situation, and provides further evidence of the USSR’s assumption that the Koreans were not ready for self-rule. These miscalculations and unpreparedness precluded successful cooperation between the USSR and North Koreans in the occupied peninsula.

COMMUNIZING THE NORTH: THE SCA AND KOREAN COMMUNIST GROUPS (1945 TO 1946)

Archival documents from the early period of occupation also illustrate the USSR’s initial misreading of the communist presence on the peninsula and a clear shift in focus away from communist groups in the South. From 1945 to 1946, the SCA focused its policies on maintaining control in the North and completely ignored developments in the South. This sharp policy shift is apparent in three documents from 1945 to 1946, which offer a glimpse into the drastically shifting Soviet interests in the early stages of occupation. The documents also highlight the multiple layers within Soviet policy and archival material, offering insight into the

Program Digital Archive, Archives of the Russian General Staff, op. 480, 29, st. 5, p. 2, pa. 21, k. 35. Translated by Gary Goldberg.

³⁷ “Untitled memorandum on the political and morale situation of Soviet troops in North Korea and the economic situation in Korea,” January 11, 1946

contrasting assessments of events in Korea made within diplomatic circles in the Soviet Union and among Soviet officials in the SCA.

In a report conducted by the SCA, which sketched the existing communist movement in the North and South in 1945, the authors concluded that while they were the most influential party throughout the peninsula, they “turned out to have neither the proper leaders nor a clear and specific platform.”³⁸ The report also highlighted the need for Soviet policy to concern itself with communist groups in the South which, while powerful, were competing with a larger Democratic party that represented “big landowners and capitalists” and “openly engaged in pro-imperialist and anti-Communist propaganda.”³⁹ An assessment of Korea written by Soviet diplomat Yakov Malik in 1945 also concluded that while the communists in the North had increased their influence, there was a “noticeable tendency” of the American authorities in limiting the political activity of communists in the South.⁴⁰ An obvious difference in the documents however was that while the SCA report pointed out numerous insufficiencies among the northern communist organizations, Malik’s report was far more optimistic and makes no mentions of these points. This is a result of the intended audiences of the documents, as the SCA report was top secret, while Malik’s report was meant for dissemination among larger diplomatic

³⁸ "Soviet Report on Communists in Korea, 1945," 1945, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AGShVS RF. F. 172. OP 614631. D. 23 pp. 21-26. Translated by Gary Goldberg.

³⁹ "Soviet Report on Communists in Korea, 1945," 1945, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AGShVS RF. F. 172. OP 614631. D. 23 pp. 21-26. Translated by Gary Goldberg.

⁴⁰ "Soviet Foreign Ministry Report, 'On the Question of a United Government in Korea'," December 10, 1945, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of Foreign Policy of the USSR, f. 0102, op. 1, p. 1, d. 15.

circles in the Soviet Union. Therefore, while both documents reveal Soviet policy focusing heavily on the southern communist movement, the SCA report reveals the realities of the Soviets Union's control in the North.

In contrast to the 1945 documents, a 1946 SCA report assessing the political and economic situation, painted a far more pessimistic assessment of the communist movement in the North, and entirely excluded the South. In the report, Lieutenant Colonel Fedorov and Major Livshits outline the serious weaknesses of the northern communist movement, including the fact that there were "no communists in the villages" and that the organizations had failed to attract workers or peasants. The report concludes by prescribing a purge within the party, adding that, "in the present situation the Korean Communist Party ... is problematical at the very least...there is still no order in their own house. Organizationally it is still a very loose and motley mass choked with alien elements."⁴¹ Noticeably absent is any mention of the southern communist movement and other documents from 1946 to 1948 do not make any more mentions of Soviet policy thinking or deliberation on this issue. As historian Armstrong argues, Stalin ordered restraint within North Korea, as he was extremely cautious of provoking the United States by supporting revolution in the South.⁴² Armstrong also places emphasis on the fact that Stalin ignored the South due to the fact that supporting the southern communists wouldn't contribute to maintaining Soviet control over the North, which was the USSR's

⁴¹ "Untitled Memorandum on the Political and Morale Situation of Soviet Troops in North Korea and the Economic Situation in Korea," January 11, 1946.

⁴² Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution*, 127

primary focus.⁴³ However, it is evident from the 1945 and 1946 reports that this decision also arose from the fact that the Soviet Union had miscalculated the feasibility of a strong communist government in the North. Therefore, the USSR's neglect of southern communists and cooperation with the United States can also be explained as a consequence of its focus on the issues within its own zone of occupation. By 1946 the Soviet Union had begun to consolidate its interests in the peninsula and, acknowledging its failures, focused on tightening its grip on North Korea.

PROVISIONAL PARTY AND SOVIET PEOPLES DEMOCRACY (1946 - 1948)

Unfortunately, of the available Soviet politburo documents from 1946 - 1948, only a small fraction make any mention of Korea. One of the inferences that can be made from this is that the SCA was given a high level of autonomy, and was allowed to decide on and implement policies with little oversight.⁴⁴ Since military documents are almost completely inaccessible however, the result has been a significant gap of information for scholars of Soviet-North Korean relations in this period, especially in 1948 when the Soviet government officially withdrew from Korea. The documents that are available however are significant in that they help shed light on Stalin's relationship with North Korea vis-à-vis the SCA and suggest that Stalin gave an unusual amount of independence to the SCA, deferring to Shtykov on matters of Korean affairs. While the USSR had begun to tighten its grip over the North in 1946

⁴³ Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution*, 127; Cumings, Bruce. *The Origins of the Korean War*. (Seoul.: Yuksabipyungsa, 2002), 88

⁴⁴ Lankov, Andrej N. *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

and closely controlled the growth of the communist party, by 1947 it had become less directly and less aggressively involved in Korea.

Due to the USSR's belief that the Korean people were not ready for self-rule and its awareness of the limitations of the local communists, they did not officially recognize any local group that claimed to represent the people as the legitimate government.⁴⁵ Instead, they decided to import communist leaders who were neither independent nor too far removed from Soviet control. Established under direct supervision in December 1945, the Provisional People's Committee for North Korea was led by Kim Il Sung, a Korean guerrilla fighter and a Major in the Soviet Red Army, who was handpicked by Marshal of the Soviet Union Lavrentiy Beria and supported by Terentii Shtykov, head of the SCA.⁴⁶ By February 1946, the SCA officially handed over its authority to Kim and the Provisional People's Committee for North Korea, which brought its de facto control to an end. While the exact structure of power sharing after this transfer is not made clear from the archives, the SCA continued to maintain a strong level of influence in Korea, and as Lankov argues, "at the very least it gave Moscow full information on what was going on in North Korea."⁴⁷ The Soviet Union further maintained control within the newly formed provisional government. Although the government consisted of a number of different factions of communist groups, including former guerrilla fighters, domestic communist groups and those loyal to China, the strongest camp was the Soviet faction, with Kim IL Sung at its helm.

⁴⁵ Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 24

⁴⁶ Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 26

⁴⁷ Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 47

While the general consensus among recent historians has been that Stalin showed restraint on the peninsula, there have been varying inferences made on the Soviet Union's commitment and contribution to developing a communist revolution in Korea. Historians such as Armstrong for example, emphasize that the Soviet Union did not play the most important role in the development of the communist party in North Korea. He highlights that communism had already become an important part of the political discourse of anti-colonial resistance in Korea, adding that "the DPRK was more than a revolution from abroad, imposed by the fiat of the Soviet occupation, but was shaped by local circumstances and recent historical legacies."⁴⁸ Cummings also makes similar assertions and supports the idea that the communist party arose in spite of any Soviet involvement. Both historians make strong cases for Korean agency in the emergence of the communist party however they err by bolstering their arguments with the idea that the Soviets allowed a democratic party in Korea to form with multiple parties including nationalist and religious groups.⁴⁹ This argument that the Soviet Union facilitated the establishment of a democratic government, and therefore that communism arose naturally, is fundamentally flawed and ignores the USSR's direct involvement in shaping the movement in North Korea. More recently, historians have pointed to a model, initially proposed by British historian Hugh Seton-Watson, in which communists groups, supported by the Soviet Union, would attempt to gain power in three stages: a real coalition with other parties, a bogus coalition in which communists would

⁴⁸ Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution*, 53

⁴⁹ Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution*, 58

subvert power, and a final stage in which they would establish hegemonic control.⁵⁰ Lankov applies this model to Korea, arguing that it closely resembled the early stages of socialist development in North Korea, when Stalin and his ideologists devised the theoretical concept of a "People's Democracy."⁵¹ In this concept, the Soviet Union would first pursue policies of cooperation and moderation by establishing broad democratic revolutions, which would include numerous political groups. However, this initial stage was not seen as a permanent state in the political evolution but rather a "transitional type of system, the principle function of which is the construction of socialism."⁵² In the Korean context, this cooperation could be seen in the Provisional government, which consisted of 141,000 members in the Democratic Party and only 43,000 in the Communist Party.⁵³ While on the surface this had made it seem that the provisional government had fair representation, the USSR appointed communist leaders to the other parties to ensure their compliance.⁵⁴ Therefore, while the Soviet Union encouraged cooperation and tolerated non-communist parties within the United Democratic National Front, under the guise of political pluralism, in reality they had little to no independence and were quickly weakened and eliminated by the communists.

⁵⁰ Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 8

⁵¹ Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 9

⁵² Ruth Amende Rosa, "The Soviet Theory of 'People's Democracy'," *World Politics* 1, no. 4 (July 1949): 491.

⁵³ "Memo on the Political Parties and Organizations of the Soviet Occupation Zone in Korea as of 20 May 1946), signed by Colonel Tsygichko, in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii (RGASPI), Fond (F.) 17, Opis' (Op.) 128, Delo (D.) 205, Listy (Ll.) 13–15.

⁵⁴ Van Ree, *Socialism in One Zone*; 13

Another argument brought forward, and one especially prominent in revisionist accounts, is that Stalin ordered restraint by North Koreans against landlords and didn't support major socialist reforms. These historians point to a document written by Stalin in 1945, which asserted that Koreans would have political independence and argue that the early reforms made by the provisional government were nationalist in origin and involved little to no Soviet involvement.⁵⁵ These perspectives tend to highlight Soviet cooperation and Korean agency in North Korean political life. For example, historian Chong-Sik Lee points to the 1946 North Korean Land Reform Laws which emphasized that the property of Japanese occupiers and collaborators was to be nationalized, therefore making the reforms a nationalist, rather than a socialist, program.⁵⁶ This argument attempts to distance the political developments in 1946 from direct Soviet interference, however it ignores the fact that in practice the majority of large and medium sized industries were forced to collaborate with the Japanese, and therefore the reforms were socialist in practice.⁵⁷ Furthermore, recent documents have shown the constant involvement of the SCA in the Provisional Government, including their drafting of Kim Il Sung's speech to the congress of the Workers Party of North Korea in 1946, which outlined the land reform laws.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Cumings, Bruce. *The Origins of the Korean War*. Seoul.: Yuksabipyungsa, 2002; 122; Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution: 1945-1950*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013; 28

⁵⁶ Chong-Sik Lee, "Land Reform, Collectivisation and the Peasants in North Korea," *The China Quarterly* 14 (April/May 1963): 67.

⁵⁷ Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 24

⁵⁸ Translation from Kim Il Sung, *For the Establishment of a United Party of the Working Masses: Report to the Inaugural Congress of the Workers' Party of North Korea, August 29, 1946* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1974).

While the Soviet government clearly played a prominent role in establishing a friendly regime, by 1947 primary documents show a waning interest, as well as the increased role that the SCA played. A recently declassified 1947 ciphered telegram from Shtykov to Stalin is indicative of the Soviet Civil Administration's role in Soviet- North Korean relations, as well as Stalin's and the Politburo's loosening of their direct involvement in the region. In the telegram, Shtykov directly addressed the Politburo, asserting the need for 86 Soviet engineers and specialists to build railroads after having spent 6 months pleading with the Soviet government to no avail.⁵⁹ What is immediately striking about the telegram is its direct and instructive language. In the post war period Stalin recast the Politburo to fit with his personal habits, and all decisions necessitated his approval, with the Politburo retaining very little, if any freedom of initiative.⁶⁰ This created a culture of deference within the politburo, and Stalin's inferiors avoided giving him direct instructions. As evidenced in numerous archival documents, subordinates would only suggest policies to Stalin, always deferring to him on the final word. The language in Shtykov's telegram however is unique in its directness and instructs Stalin that he "needs" to employ the policies being suggested.⁶¹ This suggests several key points in the relationships between the Soviet government, the SCA and North Korea. Firstly, it indicates that Stalin deferred to Shtykov and the SCA on Korean affairs. Secondly, it suggests that the Soviet government was not strongly committed to political matters in Korea, as

⁵⁹ "Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin," May 12, 1947, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, CWIHP archive.

⁶⁰ Gorlizki, Yoram. "Stalins Cabinet: The Politburo and Decision Making in the Post-war Years." *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 2 (2001), 292

⁶¹ "Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin," May 12, 1947, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, CWIHP archive.

Shtykov complained that on several occasions the Soviet government outright refused his requests and then ignored him for over 6 months. Finally, in his warning to Stalin, Shtykov highlighted the fact that if “Soviet specialists are not in North Korea before the reunification of North and South Korea ... it will be inevitable that the Korean temporary government, ... will invite American specialists”, further adding that this would lead to a strengthening of American influence in Korea and a detriment to Soviet interests in the region.⁶² This warning is revealing not only because it indicates Stalin’s fears of increased American influence on the peninsula, but also that from the perspective of the SCA, an eventual reunification was inevitable. It is also an example of a tactic used by both the SCA and Kim Il Sung in pushing Stalin to become more heavily involved in the region, discussed more in depth below. Shtykov’s warning indicates that by 1947 the SCA had begun to see reunification as not only a possibility, but inevitable in the near future.

The period from late 1947 through 1948 is the least accessible in the archival material due to the fact that the daily management of North Korean affairs was conducted by the SCA by this point. The actions of the SCA are largely unavailable to historians since almost all communication was internal and Shtykov rarely discussed policy with Stalin.⁶³ As a memo to the Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union explained, “The Foreign Relations Department has not, to the present time, been receiving regular and detailed information about the situation in Korea because the [SCA] located in Pyongyang, send all the information to their

⁶² “Untitled memorandum on the political and morale situation of Soviet troops in North Korea and the economic situation in Korea,” January 11, 1946

⁶³ Soviet Politburo Decisions and the Emergence of the North Korean State, 1946-1948; 398

respective Departments.”⁶⁴ The immediate inference to be drawn is that by this point, Stalin heavily relied on Shtykov to oversee the new North Korean provisional government and diffused an unprecedented amount of power to the SCA. There are however two major exceptions where Stalin was directly involved in the management of North Korea. In February 1948, Stalin and the Politburo drafted the Provisional Government Constitution, and later in April, met again, to discuss the establishment of an independent North Korean State and reject the results of the South Korean elections.⁶⁵ However, these two actions were focused on solidifying a separate government in the North, thereby preventing a peaceful reunification.

On September 18, 1948, the Soviet Union announced to North Korea that it would officially withdraw all troops from North Korea by the end of the year. The final withdrawal was completed on December 15, 1948 with approximately 200 military advisors remaining in the North.⁶⁶ Although the withdrawal was made ostensibly to remove foreign influence from Korea, the Soviet Union was fully aware that the creation of two separate governments precluded a reunification of the peninsula.⁶⁷ At this point, Soviet policy was still ill defined, and focused on

⁶⁴ Memo to M. A. Suslov, the Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, The Russian Center for Preservation and Exploration of the Documents of Recent History (RtsHIDNI), find 17, opis 128, delo 1440, list 9 (1948)

⁶⁵ Andrei. Lankov. *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*. (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2015), 6

In 1947, the UN had called for elections to take place the following year in order to establish an independent and unified Korea. The Soviet Union however refused to accept the UN's terms and the elections proceeded only in the South, with a separate Northern election occurring on February 20, 1947. On July 20, 1948, the newly formed South Korean Constitutional Assembly elected the firmly anti-communist, Syngman Rhee

⁶⁶ Halliday, Jon, and Bruce Cumings. *Korea: The Unknown War*. (London: Penguin, 1990) 60

⁶⁷ Andrei. Lankov. *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 12

maintaining influence over the North rather than developing any serious plans towards reunification.

STALIN'S POLICY "SHIFT" AND THE "CHANGED INTERNATIONAL SITUATION"
(1949-1950)

After the withdrawal in late 1948, a critical point of contention for Soviet foreign policy in Korea was the disparity between the Soviet Union's restrained attitude and the highly nationalistic Korean communists who were determined to extend their authority over the entire peninsula.⁶⁸ Despite constant pleas for an invasion from Kim IL Sung, Stalin rejected his ambitions, and maintained a cautious policy. However, on May 14, 1950 Stalin seemingly made a dramatic shift when, in a telegram to Mao, he confirmed his agreement with North Korea on the proposal to invade South Korea. The telegram was brief and did not outline Stalin's rationale, but rather gave a vague assertion that due to the "changed international situation" the Soviet Union agreed with the proposal of Kim IL Sung to "move toward reunification."⁶⁹ What Stalin meant by the altered international situation continues to remain at the center of debate among Korean War historians. A variety of theories have been proposed which debate the factors that influenced Stalin's decision and whether he acted pre-emptively out of a sense of inferiority and fear of a southern

⁶⁸ Weathersby, Kathryn. "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence" *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Winter 1993), 430

⁶⁹ "Cable from Vyshinsky to Mao Zedong, Relaying Stalin's Stance on Permission for North Korea to attack South Korea," May 14, 1950, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, The document, from the Russian Presidential Archives, was given by Russian President Boris Yeltsin to South Korean President Kim Young-Sam during the latter's visit to Moscow in June 1994, and was made available to CWIHP by the South Korean Embassy in Washington.

led invasion, or whether he was bolstered by the increased offensive capabilities of the Soviet Union and North Korea. Archival materials show that Stalin's initial decision to pursue an invasion were motivated by fears of a southern led invasion and the increasing strength of the South, however he only chose to officially confirm an invasion once he was sure that a quick victory could be ensured with Chinese assistance, and limited or no American involvement.

Furthermore, although archival materials have not shed much light on Stalin's specific considerations, they have illuminated the path that Soviet foreign policy took from the early months of 1949 until the invasion's approval in May 1950. While the decision to invade has been labelled by a number of historians as a dramatic shift or a "U-Turn" in foreign policy, it is clear from records that the decision was a logical step that was carefully planned and arose from a cautious but opportunistic policy.⁷⁰ Some historians, such as Anatoly Torkunov, have gone further and argued that up until 1950, Stalin still seriously considered pursuing a peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula.⁷¹ In reality, Stalin had already begun to accept the idea of assisting Kim in a military campaign early in 1949. However Stalin's decision centered heavily on assessments of the potential of American intervention and the strength of the North Korean military vis-à-vis South Korea. Stalin wanted to avoid a protracted conflict with minimal foreign interference, therefore his denials of Kim's multiple requests for invasion throughout 1949 were never outright, but rather always conditional and issued on the basis of

⁷⁰ Kim Donggil, Stalin's Korean U-Turn: The USSR's Evolving Security Strategy and the Origins of the Korean War. *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies*. 24. 2011, 96

⁷¹ Torkunov, The War in Korea 1950 – 1953, 34

unfavourable timing. To this end, Stalin relied heavily on Kim IL Sung and the SCA for information on political and military matters on the Korean Peninsula, which Kim took full advantage of to push a narrative of conflicts at the border, instigated by the South. By fuelling the idea that a conflict was inevitable, Kim worked to further convince Stalin of the necessity for a pre-emptive invasion, while at the same time alleviating Stalin's largest concern of a potential American response. Stalin was not as convinced of the urgency as Kim, as illustrated by his somewhat restrained attitude and decision not to invade in 1949. However Kim's influence played a large role in Soviet decision-making in Korea, specifically in Stalin's assessment of American intervention.

Traditional narratives regarding Stalin's decision for invasion in 1950 have generally centered on the increased offensive capabilities of the Soviet Union, which arose primarily from the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in the civil war and the USSR's first successful test of the atomic bomb at the end of 1949. Anatoly Torkunov argues for example that Stalin felt emboldened after the acquisition of the atomic bomb and felt he had been given a free hand in Korea since he believed that the Soviet Union's atomic capabilities would deter US Intervention in the Far East.⁷² Other historians, including the authors of "Uncertain Partners", have even suggested that the turn towards Asia was insincere and these capabilities gave Stalin the impetus to divert military attention away from Europe.⁷³ This argument has

⁷² Anatoli Torkunov. *The War in Korea 1950 - 1953: Its Origin, Bloodshed and Conclusion*. (Tokyo: ICF Publishers, 2000); 13

⁷³ Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Litai Xue, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995). 47

recently been revived after the release of a letter in which Stalin retroactively assessed the initial decisions for an invasion with a communist ally. However, as will be discussed in detail below, the document is not a credible resource as it sharply deviates from the other available material. Furthermore, the investment made by Stalin is also supported by the sheer economic contributions that the Soviet Union made to North Korea from 1945 to 1949, the numerous cultural and political agreements, as well as the newly revealed extent of military support provided during the initial invasion.⁷⁴

Not only do these narratives rely on biasedly culled material, they also fail to account for the Soviet foreign policy failures at the time that contributed to Stalin's shifting attention towards Asia as well as Stalin's insecurities of an inevitable southern led invasion. As Soviet foreign policy expert Samuel Jr. Wells notes, prior to 1949, the Soviet Union's primary foreign policy goals were to prevent the establishment of a western defensive alliance in Europe, which included the United States, and to block the creation of a separate West German government.⁷⁵ By early 1949, these policy goals were defeated after the establishment of NATO and the Federal Republic of Germany, which influenced Stalin to focus more economic and military resources in Asia. Another aspect that many of these narratives either miss entirely or downplay was the insecurity among the Soviet leadership of a southern led invasion. As Torkunov notes, "up to the end of 1949 ... [Stalin] experienced a

⁷⁴ Weathersby, Kathryn. "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence" *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Winter 1993), 437

⁷⁵ Wells, Jr, Samuel. "Stalin's Decisions for War in Korea" Presentation at the Woodrow Wilson Conference, Washington, D.C, June 6, 2013.

growing fear that the opposing side would violate peace and attack North Korea.”⁷⁶ Among his allies Stalin acted seemingly unconcerned of the ROK, even joking in a meeting with Kim in March 1949 that he had nothing to fear of the “puny southern army.”⁷⁷ However, in his internal communication amongst the politburo, he frequently worried about the strength of the ROK, even reprimanding Shtykov for failing to report clashes at the border.⁷⁸

How heavily Stalin weighed each individual factor though, cannot be ascertained as Stalin kept no personal diary, nor were there any documents indicating policy debates among the politburo.⁷⁹ However, the explanations for Stalin’s decisions need not be mutually exclusive, as the archival material shows that they were all seriously considered in the decision to invade. What is also made clear by the archival material is that Stalin’s decision was neither a dramatic shift, as some historians have depicted, nor was it a reluctantly sanctioned attack. By 1949, Stalin had already abandoned his policy to preserve the status quo, and actively monitored the Korean situation to find an opportunity to support and plan a rapid invasion of the South.

⁷⁶ Torkunov, Anatoli. *The War in Korea 1950 - 1953: Its Origin, Bloodshed and Conclusion*. Tokyo: ICF Publishers, 2000.

⁷⁷ “Meeting between Stalin and Kim Il Sung,” March 05, 1949, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, listy 10-20.

⁷⁸ Kathryn Weathersby, “The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1993), pp. 446-47; Stalin to Shtykov, 30 October, 1949, in Weathersby, “Should We Fear This?,” p. 11.

⁷⁹ Lankov, Andrei. “Soviet Politburo Decisions and the Emergence of the North Korean State, 1946-1948.” *Korea Observer* Autumn 2005; 36, 3; 400

Although Stalin was opportunistic and desired an eventual absorption of South Korea, he maintained peaceful reunification as a possible, though increasingly unlikely, option. While Stalin did not officially change his on-going policy of non-aggression, as early as March/April 1949 there was a clear shift away from restraint during which time the Soviet Union extensively built up North Korea militarily and economically.⁸⁰ This shift was heavily influenced by both the SCA and Kim IL Sung exploited the conflicts at the border in order to instill a fear in Stalin of a southern led invasion, and eliminating a peaceful reunification as a likely scenario. This fear was propagated throughout early 1949 by numerous reports of increased clashes along the border between the armies of the North and South, as well as the increased buildup of southern forces. Stalin took these reports seriously, exhibited by his response to one on April 20th of significant numbers of violations from South Koreans over the 38th parallel, in which he advised that the North Koreans should begin preparations for more provocative actions from the South.⁸¹ Shtykov continued to send numerous cables to Stalin maintaining that an invasion of North Korea would result in a swift and decisive victory at very little cost to the South.⁸² On May 2, 1949, Shtykov heavily pushed an alarmist narrative of an impending attack by the South reporting that in connection with military intrusions of the North, the ROK was dramatically growing in size and was being concentrated along

⁸⁰ Weathersby, Kathryn. "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence" *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Winter 1993), 430

⁸¹ "Telegram, Shtemenko and Vasilevsky to Stalin," April 20, 1949, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, CWIHP archive.

⁸² "Telegram from Shtykov on Preparations for an Attack on North Korea," May 02, 1949, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, List III, pages 41-44. Translated by Kathryn Weathersby.

the 38th parallel, highlighting that “the South Korean authorities are paying special attention to the Pyongyang direction.”⁸³ He also highlighted the extent of aid provided by America, as well as a purge of unreliable soldiers in the Republic of Korea Army (ROK) being replaced with “reactionary youth”.⁸⁴ Further fueling Stalin’s fears, he added that an operation by the South had already been planned and passed on to commanders and “supposedly planned for the month of June.”⁸⁵ He even fueled fears of a southern conspiracy suggesting that “[a]gents of the South have set up terrorist and subversive groups in every province in the North, which are ordered to recruit new members, conduct espionage, and draft plans for uprisings.”⁸⁶ He finally concluded that North Korea “did not have enough trained personnel, adequate weapons... to rebuke intensifying excursions from the South.”⁸⁷ Though Shtykov’s reports were not entirely fabricated, Katheryn Weathersby argues they heavily exaggerated the actual situation at the border and undoubtedly influenced Stalin to abandon his belief in a peaceful reunification.⁸⁸ Throughout the rest of 1949, Stalin came to see military reunification as not only likely, but inevitable.

To this end one of the important factors under consideration by Stalin was the support of China, as he did not want to shoulder the responsibility for a

⁸³ “Telegram from Shtykov on Preparations for an Attack on North Korea,” May 02, 1949

⁸⁴ “Telegram from Shtykov on Preparations for an Attack on North Korea,” May 02, 1949

⁸⁵ “Telegram from Shtykov on Preparations for an Attack on North Korea,” May 02, 1949

⁸⁶ “Telegram from Shtykov on Preparations for an Attack on North Korea,” May 02, 1949

⁸⁷ “Telegram from Shtykov on Preparations for an Attack on North Korea,” May 02, 1949
Kathryn Weathersby. “Should We Fear This?” Stalin and the Danger of War with America” Working Paper No. 39, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (July 2002)

prolonged conflict, which could damage Soviet reputation. As Richard Peters and Xiaobing Li argue, this support was a prerequisite for any invasion plans, as Stalin would have nothing to lose since “the onus of the attack would fall on Mao and Kim, regardless of its success or US reaction.”⁸⁹ On May 18, 1949 this support was tentatively given through a telegram from Kovalev, leader of a group of Soviet specialists in Northeast China, to the Soviet Council of Ministers. In it, Mao relayed a message to the Soviet Union, confirming a drastic increase in aid to North Korea and promising that if a war between the North and South broke out, China would do everything within its power to support North Korea.⁹⁰ Mao also advised Kovalev that Kim should wait until an opportune moment to strike, detailing “an attack by North Korea on the South might be mounted at the beginning of 1950 if the situation at the beginning of 1950 favors this.”⁹¹ For Stalin, this expression of support and affirmation that an attack could be mounted at an appropriate time, helped to solidify his resolve of the invasion’s inevitability.

By September 1949, the SCA reports, Kim’s pleas and China’s affirmation of support influenced Stalin to again seriously consider assisting North Korea in a military campaign. In a September 11 telegram from Deputy Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang, the Soviet Union attempted to ascertain the military and political ramifications of a northern led invasion. The

⁸⁹ Voices from the Korean War: Personal Stories of American, Korean, and ... 14

⁹⁰ “Telegram from the leader of the group of Soviet specialists in Northeast China to the Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers about the results of the Chinese-Korean talks on military cooperation,” May 18, 1949, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AP RF. F. 4. Op. 1. D. 331. pp. 59-61. Translated by Gary Goldberg.

⁹¹ *ibid*

letter relayed a message from Stalin urging an immediate meeting with Kim in order to probe him regarding the strength of the ROK and the Northern Army, the conditions of the partisan movement in the South and what kind of measures the Americans could potentially take in response to a northern invasion.⁹² This was the first serious attempt by the Soviet Union to consider the proposal of invasion. However, by September 14, after discussing these questions with the North Koreans, the SCA had advised Stalin that it was politically disadvantageous to attack as the North would be seen as aggressors, and moreover that a quick victory would not be possible due to military insufficiencies.⁹³ The SCA furthermore highlighted a fear that a prolonged conflict would give “the possibility to the Americans to render corresponding aid to Rhee... the Americans probably will intervene in Korean affairs more decisively than they did in China and ... apply all their strength to save Rhee.”⁹⁴ A document from September 24, 1949 reaffirmed and further elucidated the Politburo’s decision against invasion citing the North Korean military’s inferiority, the lack of a partisan movement in South Korea, and the potential of American interference.⁹⁵ However, although Stalin again rejected plans for an invasion, it is important that it was a Soviet incentive to pursue these questions in the first place, and not a direct response to Kim’s pleas for assistance. Furthermore, these

⁹² “Telegram from Gromyko to Tunkin at the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang,” September 11, 1949, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVP RF, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, list 45.

⁹³ “Telegram from Tunkin to the Soviet Foreign Ministry in Reply to 11 September Telegram,” September 14, 1949, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVP RF, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, listy 46-53.

⁹⁴ “Telegram from Tunkin to the Soviet Foreign Ministry in Reply to 11 September Telegram,” September 14, 1949

⁹⁵ “Politburo Decision to Confirm the Following Directive to the Soviet Ambassador in Korea,” September 24, 1949, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVP RF, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, listy 75-77.

rejections were neither outright, nor did they explicitly reject the idea of an invasion, but were rather based on disadvantageous timing. At this point, the Soviet Union decisively abandoned its policy of peaceful reunification and instead began to search for an opportune moment to begin the invasion.

While both the SCA reports and Kim IL Sung's pleas both agreed on the need to invest in the North Korean military, the SCA also stressed that there was a high chance of a prolonged conflict with American involvement. The 1949 SCA documents not only reveal that the largest consideration for the Soviet Union regarding the invasion was American involvement, but also the specific fears among the leadership. According to it, a drawn out war could be "used by the Americans for purposes of agitation against the Soviet Union and for further inflaming war hysteria" and "could turn the [Korean] population against the party that started the conflict."⁹⁶ The fear of a prolonged conflict was important to Stalin because not only would it mean losing influence in Korea, but also the damaging effects it would have on Soviet reputation in Asia.

DEAN ACHESON PRESS CLUB SPEECH (1950)

In Stalin's consideration of American involvement, perhaps one of the largest events with potential to sway foreign policy in Korea was a speech presented on January 12, 1950, by U.S Secretary of Defense, Dean Acheson, to the National Press Club. In his speech, Acheson outlined the United States foreign policy in Asia as well as the defensive perimeter of the Pacific, importantly leaving the Korean peninsula

⁹⁶ "Politburo Decision to Confirm the Following Directive to the Soviet Ambassador in Korea," September 24, 1949

outside of the protected zone. While the panicked reaction in the ROK to the speech has been well documented, the question of its impact on Stalin and Soviet foreign policy remains unresolved.⁹⁷ Since one of Stalin's primary concerns in approving Kim's lobbying for invasion was the possibility of American intervention, the effects of the Acheson speech on Soviet policy has been given a central role in the narrative. However, with the archival materials available, it is evident that the speech had a negligible impact on decision making in the invasion of South Korea.

Historians such as Kim Hakjoon have given this speech a prominent role, advancing the opinion that this exclusion provided Stalin with a green light to invade since it was likely seen in Moscow as evidence that the United States would not intervene in any conflict.⁹⁸ Hakjoon goes further, arguing that when Stalin referred to the changed international situation he "probably had in mind the speech given ... by U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson three months earlier in January, 1950."⁹⁹ Kathryn Weathersby similarly concludes that the timing of Stalin's approval was "at least in part" a response to the new defensive perimeter.¹⁰⁰ Other historians however have questioned the importance of the Acheson Speech such as James Matray and the authors of *Uncertain Partners* who argue that Acheson's

⁹⁷ Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Reexamined by James I. Matray

⁹⁸ Kim Hakjoon, "Russian Foreign Ministry Documents on the Origins of the Korean War," Conference on "The Korean War: An Assessment of the Historical Record," Georgetown University, 24-25 July 1995.

⁹⁹ Kim Hakjoon, "Russian Foreign Ministry Documents on the Origins of the Korean War," 24-25 July 1995

¹⁰⁰ Weathersby, Kathryn. "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence" *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Winter 1993), 433

speech had little if any impact on Soviet deliberations.¹⁰¹ As Robert Tucker, a Soviet political history expert points out, even though Indochina was excluded from the perimeter as well, it was clear to the Soviet Union that U.S aid and growing involvement was underway, therefore U.S responses to a Korean crisis could not be anticipated based simply on Acheson's declaration.¹⁰² Historians have also pointed to the fact that Acheson's speech was more nuanced than it is sometimes given credit for. As historian John Merrill explains, the speech "acknowledged the importance of Asian nationalism, warned of a Soviet attempt to pry loose Manchuria from China, and stressed accurately that the US would defend Korea under the collective security arrangements of the United Nations."¹⁰³ While the Acheson speech did outline a security perimeter, the remainder of the speech actually sought to build support for U.S. Policy in Korea while also serving as a warning to the Soviet Union against provocative actions.¹⁰⁴ According to Acheson in his memoirs, the speech was intended to "carry some sense of the problem in the Far East, the limitation of our power and direction of our purpose."¹⁰⁵ It is unlikely that the Soviet leadership focused only on the security perimeter and entirely missed these nuances. Furthermore, the assertion that the speech was primary in influencing

¹⁰¹ Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 27

¹⁰² Robert C. Tucker "The Cold War in Stalin's Time: What the New Sources Reveal." *Diplomatic History* 12, no. 2 (December 17, 2002): 272

¹⁰³ John Merrill. *Korea: The Peninsular Origins of the War*. (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1989), 106

¹⁰⁴ Matray, James I. "Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Reexamined." *The Journal of Conflict Studies* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2002)

¹⁰⁵ Matray, James I. "Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Reexamined." *The Journal of Conflict Studies* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2002)

policy assumes an inexperienced Stalin taking Acheson's public statement of private policy at face value.

While only one Soviet document makes mention of the speech, and there is no direct reference in it to Korea, it is illuminating in its revelation of Soviet attitudes and reading of Acheson's declaration. On January 17th, 1950, Mao visited Moscow to discuss the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, and subsequently met with Soviet leaders Molotov and Vyshinsky. During their discussions, Molotov raised to Mao the impression that Acheson's speech was "designed to deceive directly public opinion." Then, after having read the text in its entirety, Mao responded that the Americans were making progress as previously "these fabrications were the job of all kinds of scoundrels, represented by American journalists and correspondents ... [and] the U.S Secretary of State was now doing the dirty work."¹⁰⁶ Mao then asked if the speech was potentially "a kind of smokescreen, using which, the American imperialists will attempt to occupy the island of Formosa" to which Molotov agreed, adding that the United States intended to use it to carry out "plans of occupation" and "create misunderstandings in the relations between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China."¹⁰⁷ Throughout their discussions, the communist leaders continued to frequently reference the deceitful nature of the speech and developed a clear consensus that it should not be taken at face value. Therefore, it is unlikely that in their assessments of the situation on the

¹⁰⁶ V.M. Molotov and Vyshinsky Conversation with Mao Zedong, 17 January 1950, "The Cold War in the Third World and the Collapse of Detente in the 1970s," CWIHPB, Issues 8- 9 (Winter 1996/1997), pp. 232-33.

¹⁰⁷ V.M. Molotov and Vyshinsky Conversation with Mao Zedong, 17 January 1950

Korean Peninsula and the intentions of the United States, the Soviet leadership would have heavily relied on the speech.

Stalin was more receptive to the idea of a military reunification of the Korean Peninsula following the Acheson speech, however there is no evidence that it was a direct result of this. In fact, many months after the speech, Stalin remained cautious and in his March 1950 meeting with Kim, he stressed that the matter of invasion still required “thorough preparation” and must be “organized in such a way that there will not be a large risk.”¹⁰⁸ Though Stalin accepted the idea of an invasion in theory, he remained adamant about avoiding a protracted conflict, and relied on information from both the SCA and Kim IL Sung in his calculations.

THE GOTTWALD LETTER (1950)

In 2005, a letter from Stalin to Klement Gottwald, leader of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, emerged from the Soviet archives, adding a new layer to the debate regarding Stalin’s calculations of the potential United States involvement in the Korean conflict. The letter, dated August 27, 1950 was written a few months after the Soviet Union boycotted the United Nations Security Council in response to the defeat of their proposal to expel the Nationalist Chinese representative.¹⁰⁹ The absence of the Soviet Union allowed the Council to vote in favor of invoking military

¹⁰⁸ “Meeting between Stalin and Kim Il Sung,” March 05, 1949

¹⁰⁹ Robert R. Simmons, *The Strained Alliance: Peking, Pyöngyang, Moscow and the Politics of the Korean Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 20

action and sending UN forces into Korea.¹¹⁰ Historians have endlessly debated the Soviet Union's absence in the meeting, especially given the fact that it had veto power and could have easily blocked the resolution.¹¹¹ In his letter, Stalin outlined the reasons for the Soviet withdrawal, explaining,

Following our withdrawal from the Security Council, America became entangled in a military intervention in Korea and is now squandering its military prestige and moral authority. Few honest people can now doubt that America is now acting as an aggressor and tyrant in Korea and that it is not as militarily powerful as it claims to be. In addition, it is clear that the United States of America is presently distracted from Europe in the Far East. Does it not give us an advantage in the global balance of power? It undoubtedly does.¹¹²

The document indicated that Stalin not only predicted US involvement but also actually intended to lure the United States into a prolonged engagement in order to divert their resources from Europe. If true, this would confirm that the main priority in Soviet international strategy was Europe, rather than Asia and that Stalin was insincere in his alliance with Kim IL Sung and Mao. The letter would also explain Stalin's decision to veto the UN Resolution, rationalizing that by giving the American government a free hand to establish a majority vote in the Security Council, they would allow it to become embroiled in Korea. Historians such as Donggill Kim have

¹¹⁰ Weathersby, Kathryn. "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence" *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Winter 1993), 428

¹¹¹ Weathersby. "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War", 429

¹¹² "Letter from Filipov (Stalin) to Soviet Ambassador in Prague, conveying message to CSSR leader Klement Gottwald," August 27, 1950, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), fond 558, opis 11, delo 62, listy 71-72, reprinted in Andrei Ledovskii, "Stalin, Mao Tsedunh I Koreiskaia Voina 1950-1953 godov," *Novaia I Noveishaia Istoriia* no. 5 (September-October 2005), 79-113.

taken this document at face value to advance the argument that Stalin was unconcerned with US involvement and firmly place the majority of the responsibility for the conflict on Stalin, while removing agency from Kim IL Sung almost entirely.¹¹³

The overreliance of one archival document in asserting a claim illustrates the danger in cherry picking documents rather than analyzing the entire set, while also revealing the broader difficulty in interpreting Soviet sources during Stalin's reign. When reading these documents, it is crucial to carefully consider the Machiavellian character of Stalin and the image he wished to portray of Soviet leadership to his allies and the international community. Historians like William Stueck dismiss assertions such as Donggil Kim's, pointing out that the document should be seen "less as an accurate rendering of past calculations or of Stalin's current state of mind than as an effort to reassure a nervous ally of the ineffable wisdom of Soviet leadership." Stueck touches on the important point that depending on whom he was communicating with, Stalin manipulated and twisted the image of his leadership, therefore helping to explain the sometimes-contradictory nature of the primary documents. The Gottwald letter's credibility is placed into further question, as it is not corroborated by any other documents from the period. While the letter presents Stalin as having a shrewd Korean master plan, the remainder of the materials clearly shows a cautious Soviet policy that feared and carefully calculated the potential involvement of the United States. Considering the fact that Stalin held off for over a

¹¹³ Donggil, Kim. Stalin's Korean U-Turn: The USSR's Evolving Security Strategy and the Origins of the Korean War. *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies*. 24. (2011); 100

year on Kim's requests, specifically urging the need to contain the scale of the conflict it is clear that he was waiting for an opportune moment to invade and avoid a protracted conflict. Kim had tirelessly worked to convince Stalin that the conflict would be over quickly. Finally, the sheer amount of economic and military support provided to North Korea illustrates a clear commitment to the region by Stalin. The most recent archival documents have proven the full extent of the military assistance provided by the Soviet Union showing the direct participation of Soviet pilots in the conflict.¹¹⁴ Assurances by Kim IL Sung that the conflict would be over quickly with no foreign involvement were factors that Stalin took under serious consideration, and therefore the Gottwald letter was simply retroactive justification for a conflict that became unintendedly prolonged.

BETWEEN TWO GIANTS: KIM'S POLICY OF BALANCING (1950)

After Soviet troops withdrew in 1948, Kim had begun to consolidate power and gain independence within the North Korean political system, however he found it harder to gain independence from Stalin and Mao. As Lankov argues, "despite the noisy assertion of North Korean propaganda, the dependence of ...North Korea ... on the Soviet Union and China was never really overcome."¹¹⁵ To maintain control over his foreign policy, Kim was instead forced to influence Stalin through a tactic known as a "policy of balancing" between Moscow and Beijing. Contrary to the orthodox

¹¹⁴ Weathersby, Kathryn. "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence" *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Winter 1993), 437

¹¹⁵ Andrej N. Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 64

image of a coherent and monolithic communist partnership, post-revisionist scholars tend to recognize the early alliance between Stalin and Mao as problematic and uneasy.¹¹⁶ During the Chinese civil war, Stalin was hesitant to provide the PLA with support and played both sides by maintaining a relationship with nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, while Mao ignored Stalin's advice on making agreements with the Nationalist Kuomintang.¹¹⁷ As Korean historian Hyung-Kook Kim points out "Mao had come to power in China not because of Stalin but, in many ways, in spite of Stalin."¹¹⁸ In fact, after the PLA victory, Stalin had failed to congratulate Mao and did not immediately recognize the PRC.¹¹⁹ Though the Treaty of Friendship in 1950 signaled a rapprochement in their relationship, Stalin still found it difficult to embrace Mao and the treaty was primarily a pragmatic measure to address security concerns in Asia.¹²⁰ By exploiting these major rifts between the USSR and China, Kim was able to gain aid and support for the invasion of South Korea from Stalin under his own terms while at the same time, reducing the influence of the USSR and China in the region. Both Stalin and Mao were aware that if one of the allies faltered, Kim could simply turn to the other.¹²¹

While Kim's policy of balancing is briefly acknowledged in some of the literature on North Korean foreign relations, it has not received adequate attention

¹¹⁶ Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 12

¹¹⁷ Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 34

¹¹⁸ Kim, Hyung-Kook. *The Division of Korea and the Alliance Making Process: 1945-1948*. (Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 1995), 15

¹¹⁹ Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 7

¹²⁰ Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 11

¹²¹ Robert R. Simmons, *The Strained Alliance: Peking, Pyöngyang, Moscow and the Politics of the Korean Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 58

in the historiography of the Korean War. This is partly due to the fact that Kim's policy only became prominent and refined during the Sino-Soviet Split in the late 50's and 60's, and was only first acknowledged in reports from communist embassies in North Korea in the late 1970's.¹²² However, archival evidence shows that the policy had its origins much earlier, in the lead up to the Korean War. Between 1945 and 1948 North Korea relied heavily on support from the Soviet Union and was highly dependent on it both economically and politically. While it had closer cultural and historic ties to China, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) were embroiled in a civil war and the Communist Party of China was not in a position to provide significant support to North Korea. Bruce Cummings proposes that the PLA's victory in September 1949 and the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China had an enormous refractory effect on Kim IL Sung's foreign policy.¹²³ Not only had it provided the North Korean regime with an additional source of aid, it had provided it with a powerful ally that could offset the Soviet Union's influence in the country.

Specifically, Kim exploited the growing competition between China and the USSR in his interactions with Stalin to obtain aid for an invasion of South Korea. Though documents regarding meetings between Kim and Mao have yet to be released, it is clear from Soviet sources that at least in 1950, Kim was leaning towards the Soviet Union. A ciphered telegram from Soviet representative Aleksei

¹²² "Note On a Meeting in the Embassy of Czechoslovakia on 5 September 1973," September 13, 1973, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PolA AA, MfAA, C 295/78. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Bernd Schaefer.

¹²³ *Origins, 1990, pp. 369-71*

Ignatieff in Pyongyang sent to Vyshinsky for example indicates that Mao wasn't even aware Kim was meeting with Stalin.¹²⁴ This document suggests that Kim had purposely kept China in the dark, partly in order to play up to Stalin, but also later to entice Mao to play a larger role on the peninsula.

Another document of significance is a telegram from Shtykov to the Soviet Foreign Minister regarding a drunken luncheon at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK on January 17, 1950. During the luncheon, Shtykov reported that Kim "repeatedly underscored the great interest of the Soviet people in Korea and the numerous wishes for quick unification of the country" but expressed disappointment that Stalin did not deem it necessary to attack the South. Kim had also made sure to stress the point that if the Soviet Union was unwilling to help, "Mao Zedong is his friend and will always help Korea."¹²⁵ Shtykov correctly interpreted Kim's behavior as probing the Soviet Union's outlook stating, "[i]t was obvious that he began this conversation not accidentally, but had thought it out earlier, with the goal of laying out his frame of mind and elucidating our attitude to these questions."¹²⁶ The main purpose of the luncheon for Kim was to pressure Stalin to unilaterally accept his plans for reunification while also highlighting the fact that if Stalin faltered, Mao would satisfy his requests.

¹²⁴ "Ciphered telegram, Soviet Representative Aleksei Ignatieff in Pyongyang to Vyshinsky," April 10, 1950, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVPRF, Listy 148-149, Fond and Opis not given; and AVPRF, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, Listy 98-99

¹²⁵ "Telegram Shtykov to Vyshinsky on a Luncheon at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK," January 19, 1950, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVPRF, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, listy 87-91.

¹²⁶ "Telegram Shtykov to Vyshinsky on a Luncheon at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK," January 19, 1950

In another telegram, dated May 12, 1950 Shtykov recalls the details of a meeting he had with Kim IL Sung to Vyshinski. In this meeting, Kim IL Sung detailed to Shtykov a meeting that would take place the following day between himself and Mao, and outlined the questions they would discuss which included informing China on the military invasion as well as requests for aid. Again, Kim probed Shtykov on the disposition of Soviet feelings towards this meeting asking “what kind of questions he should raise before Mao Zedong from the point of view of assistance in the intended operation.” After declining to answer, Kim then outlined that he intended to ask for ammunition and other aid from China. However after discussing further with Shtykov, Kim decided not to pursue any requests for Mao about assistance “since all his requests were satisfied by Moscow and the necessary and sufficient assistance was given to him there.”¹²⁷ Again Kim had made it apparent to Stalin that while he was thankful for Soviet support, he would need to continue to satisfy his requests or otherwise risk losing an ally to China. Kim had clearly understood that he could bolster his military and economic requests by playing off of Stalin and Mao’s competition for the mantle of leader of international communism.

In total, Kim sent over 48 telegrams to Stalin requesting approval for an invasion. Although Stalin did not approve these plans, he nevertheless provided Kim IL Sung with his economic and military requests, supporting the buildup and

¹²⁷ “Telegram Shtykov to Vyshinsky on a Luncheon at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK,” January 19, 1950, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVP RF, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, listy 87-91.

training of the North Korean Army.¹²⁸ Although Stalin undoubtedly saw an opportunity to extend communist power in the Korean peninsula, it is clear that he was also willing to maintain the status quo. Kim however exploited the fact that Stalin relied on him for information on the peninsula, as well as Stalin's wish to keep Mao in a supplicant's position. Kim furthermore echoed the SCA's reports which fueled Stalin's growing fears of a southern led invasion. In April 1950, following the secret meeting between Kim and Stalin in Moscow, Kim was sent to China to secure Mao's approval for the planned invasion which began on June 25, 1950. The conflict's final approval and planning were made by the Soviet Union, and although the conflict could not have been achieved without Stalin's assent, Kim Il Sung and the SCA played a fundamental role in convincing him of its necessity. The conflict was therefore neither "Kim IL Sung's war" as some have argued, nor was it a grand master plan created by Stalin.¹²⁹

CONCLUSION AND PARALLELS

With the constant stream of new archival evidence, the post-revisionist school has firmly shown the extent of the Soviet Union's involvement in the Korean War; however, it often gives Stalin and the USSR too much responsibility for the conflict. This paper has endeavored to add nuance to the understudied and often times misunderstood relationship between Josef Stalin and Kim IL Sung, and illuminate the decisions that led to an invasion of South Korea on June 25, 1950. The

¹²⁸ Weathersby, Kathryn. "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence" *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Winter 1993), 428

¹²⁹ Robert C. Tucker "The Cold War in Stalin's Time: What the New Sources Reveal." *Diplomatic History* 12, no. 2 (December 17, 2002): 276.

fact that Kim had understood and exploited the rift between the USSR and China shows that he was not simply a pawn in the Cold War, nor was the Korean War an international proxy war. While archival records clearly demonstrate that the Soviet Union pursued its own interests and significantly contributed to nation building in North Korea and the Korean War, Stalin never had any grand plans in the peninsula. He was cautious in his approach, and his primary ambition was to secure a communist controlled North while avoiding a prolonged military conflict.

Near the end of his life, Stalin became increasingly aware of the Soviet Union's failures in Europe and began to heavily invest in Asian communist movements. However, after the communist victory in China, Stalin began an uneasy and competitive relationship with Mao for the mantle of the communist world movement. This competition was utilized by Kim IL Sung to obtain significant military and economic aid in North Korea. Stalin was content with supporting Kim and nation building in North Korea, as long as peaceful coexistence remained on the peninsula. Stalin feared that any provocative actions against the south might result in a prolonged conflict with American intervention, which would damage the Soviet reputation abroad, and consequently jeopardize his role as the leader of the communist movement. While Stalin refused Kim's requests for invasion throughout 1948 and 1949 however, he agreed with them in principle and his rejections were conditional based on disadvantageous timing. Contrary to many arguments therefore, his eventual approval was neither reluctant nor surprising. By 1949, Stalin had begun to accept the inevitability of an attack due to both Kim and Shtykov's assessments of the situation on the peninsula. He remained cautious

however and decided to strike after receiving explicit Chinese support, along with a multitude of other factors such as the Soviet's acquisition of the nuclear bomb. Stalin was ultimately the key decision maker in the invasion, however he neither had a grand plan, nor was Kim Il Sung simply his puppet. In fact, for the majority of North Korea's buildup, Soviet policy was ill informed and largely ad-hoc.

After the culmination of the Korean War, USSR-DPRK relations quickly weakened and by the collapse of the Soviet Union, they crumbled as Russian leaders prioritized strengthening ties with South Korea and significantly cut aid to North Korea. However, as Putin begins to reassert Russian influence and foreign policy interests around the world, he has also brought about a tentative political and economic rapprochement with the DPRK. As Russia reasserts its influence in the region, while China and the United States are mired in regional negotiations, Armstrong notes that the current conflict in Korea is not a new crisis but rather one that has taken on a new form.¹³⁰ It is prudent therefore to recall the lessons from the origins of the Korea War and avoid assuming North Korea is merely a puppet regime that is easily manipulated. In negotiations for reunification and peace, it is important to recognize that North Korea is still an independent actor that continues to exploit loopholes in the international framework. As numerous scholars note, the mercurial power balancing originated by Kim Il Sung is still a prominent feature in North Korean policy today, as Kim Jong Un balances the interests of the United

¹³⁰ Armstrong, Charles. "The Nature of the North Korean Threat" Presentation at the Canadian International Council North Korean Nuclear Challenge Summit, Toronto, ON, February 26, 2018.

States and China, and to a lesser extent Russia, as they compete for influence over the peninsula.¹³¹

Though Russia is seeking both its own economic and political interests in the region, which includes boosting development in the Russian Far East, it is also interested in security along its borders and regional stability. It therefore has potential to become a faithful mediator between the North and South. Elena Ponomareva and Georgij Rudov note that the DPRK might be receptive to Russia's mediation as it is "interested in exiting the 'Chinese umbrella'" and looking to Russia as an additional base of support and as a mediator between Washington, Beijing and Seoul.¹³² Russia's role therefore should not be underestimated, especially at the present time when recent developments on the peninsula have borne historic summits between the North and South, aimed at finally establishing peace and ending a conflict that has been ongoing since 1945.

¹³¹ Elena Ponomareva and Georgij Rudov, "Russia–North Korea: State of Affairs and Trends," *Journal of Asian Public Policy* 9, no. 1 (2015): 54

¹³² Elena Ponomareva and Georgij Rudov, "Russia–North Korea: State of Affairs and Trends," *Journal of Asian Public Policy* 9, no. 1 (2015): 53

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