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**"To what extent was Stalin reluctant to approve the invasion of the Republic of Korea (ROK) by the Democratic People's Republic (DPRK)?"**

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## Introduction

The question of my investigation is **"To what extent was Stalin reluctant to approve the invasion of the Republic of Korea (ROK) by the Democratic People's Republic (DPRK)?"**. The attack in question happened on June 25, 1950, and it is considered as the starting point of the active confrontation between North Korea and South Korea that escalated to the globalization of the Cold War. The Korean War (1950-1953), a great casualty of the bipolar political world, is a nuanced conflict precipitated by international pressures of the Cold War and Korean cross-national discrepancy. Among global factors, Joseph Stalin's response to the invasion acts as a subject of a heated historical debate. American, Russian and Chinese historians have distinguished perspectives on the USSR's general attitude towards the North Korean invasion.

Apparently, the belief in Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) led the Soviet leader to eventually approve the invasion. The speculations on the nature of Stalin's response to the actions of the communist leader of the North Korean government, Kim Il Sung, vary from considering Stalin an instigator of the attack to him rebuking the invasion. Some claim that Stalin initially opposed the idea of the attack and only gave in to Kim Il Sung's persuasion later on, while Western studies suggest that Kremlin was willing to let North Korea invade the South from the start.

During the WWII period and up to 1948, there were few reasons prompting Stalin to support North Korean attack. The Soviet stance on the Korean conflict seemed neutral. However, as the Soviet Union developed their nuclear weaponry and assumed that the American government stance was passive on the Korean War from Dean Acheson's speech on the US Pacific defensive perimeter, the so-called changed international situation might have prompted a positive attitude towards the offence. The shift in Stalin's attitude towards

the Korean conflict by 1950 the East Asian foreign policy the Soviets sanctioned in the early 1940s and the failed Soviet campaigns in Europe.

This essay investigates the extent to which Stalin was reluctant to approve North Korean offensive strategy in 1950 and it discusses the objective of the Soviet foreign policy in Asia. In order to evaluate the extent of the reluctance, the investigation focuses on the impact of the fluctuating Sino-Soviet and Soviet-American relationships in 1940s and the unaffiliated tensions on the Korean peninsula on Stalin's reaction towards the North offensive.

## **Background**

To get a better comprehension of Stalin's reasons for engaging in the Korean war, the contemporary issues that emerged in the post-World War II period shall be addressed. The involvement of the Soviet Union in the Korean civil unrest depended on the Soviets' relationship with foreign governments, namely with Korea, the USA and China.

### **The Soviet-American relationship**

One of the factors that ignited the Korean War is the ideological clash between Western and Soviet regimes that boomed in the world and specifically in the Korean population. A political modernization was initiated on the Korean peninsula after its separation from Japan in 1945 when Japan capitulated to the Grand Alliance (the USA, Soviet Union and the UK) in World War II. The military demarcation line was initiated to settle the displacement position of Soviet and American troops on the Korean Peninsula to avoid conflict between the occupational armies. Due to the growing hostility between the USSR and the USA that amassed to the Cold War, there was a need to segregate their troops

on the Korean peninsula following the surrender of Japan in order to stabilize the post-war atmosphere in Korea.

In respect to the results of the Yalta (February, 1945) and Potsdam (July, 1945) agreements, the Soviet Union aimed to maintain the peace with the West. Minkova, a Russian historian, states that discussion of Korea surfaced at these international conferences superficially<sup>1</sup>. Arguably, if the fate of Pacific region and Korea was of vital interest to Stalin, he would bring it forth during the Yalta agreement as the USSR was at a greater advantage since the Soviets consented to wage war Japan upon the request from the USA and the UK. Other issues took precedence over the fate of Korea for the Allies. Yet, the division between the Allied countries became protruding already at Potsdam when H. Truman succeeded Roosevelt as a president. The cleft between the countries was more evident when later on in April 1950, Truman's office, National Security Council (NSC), suggested the policy of containment of communism (NSC-68) and ran it by United Nation in April moved by the fear of communist expansion and concerns for American security.

The patronage of Korea by both the USA and the USSR was one of the results of the Allied countries conferences. The peninsula was divided into two camps along the 38th parallel: the southern part fell under the management of the United States Army Military Government, while the northern part was managed by Soviet Civil Administration for the time being. The division of the territory by the 38th parallel standard was first suggested by D. Rusk, the US State Department official, and then approved by both governments during the Potsdam Conference 1945 as a temporary army boundary on the Korean peninsula<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Minkova, K. V. (2017). *SOVIET-AMERICAN CONTRADICTIONS REGARDING KOREA (1944–1945)*

<sup>2</sup> Minkova, K. V. (2017). *SOVIET-AMERICAN CONTRADICTIONS REGARDING KOREA (1944–1945)*

Eventually, it ceased being a temporary solution and served as a basis for the border line (See Figure 1) between North Korea and South Korea.

**Figure 1.** Closeup of the Korean Demilitarized Zone along the Demarcation line. Source: *Wikipedia*



### The significance of the Sino-Soviet relationship

China contributed to shaping the directions of the USSR's foreign policy and Soviets' approach to Korean conflict. As one of the most dominant Asian countries located near the Northern region of Korea, China could not refrain from the participation in the Korean conflict. In 1948, Mao Zedong's CCP (Chinese Communist Party) was elected as a leading political party. Debatably, despite being a positive sign of an expansion of communist beliefs, this occurrence endangered Stalin's ambitions. From the Soviet perspective, this new development posed as a risk to the USSR's global position. Mao could gain an upper-hand in the socialist countries in the Pacific region and reduce Soviets' overall influence in Asia<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Agov, A. (2013). *North Korea's Alliances and the Unfinished Korean War*.

Amidst the rivalry and the alliance, the power struggle of two communist leaders on the Asian continent was palpable.

However, the Soviet Union still supported Mao's ruling party when in January 1950, the Soviet officials protested the U.N. for their denial of the representation of China for the Chinese Communist government and endorsement of the Republic of China, the rival party that was situated in Taiwan. The absence of Soviet and Communist Chinese representative, however, promoted the antagonistic views of Truman's administration and later encouraged the military intervention in the Korean war.

### Tensions on a Korean peninsula

Talking about the Korean tensions is imperative for identifying the issues of security and ideology in the field of Soviet policies and determining whether USSR's approval of the North Korean attack was inevitable. As it happened, the plans on reunification of Korea on both sides of the border were aggressive as the nation was hugely impacted by the struggles of Japanese occupation of Korea. Regardless of Stalin's and Truman's intervention, Korean conflict aggravated. Thus, this structuralist focus on domestic factors claims that the actions taken afterward were solely initiated by Koreans, and were not guided by willingness of any international influences of Soviets or Americans.

The polarized climate of the Cold War intensified in post-Liberation Korea and the divergence of the Korean nation amplified. After the separation from the Japanese imperialist regime, the Korean Peninsula faced civil struggles. The tensions developed between the Northerners and the Southerners who tried to redefine their national identity. Presumably, the territorial division was a key factor in the establishment of two separate governments striving for legitimizing their power all over the peninsula in the 1940s. In 1948, US-backed South Korea and Soviet-supported North Korea held separate elections of the leading committees

proclaiming their aspirations for sovereignty. South Korea's First Republic of Korea (ROK) led by Syngman Rhee (1875-1965) and elected on July 24, and North Korea's Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) led by Kim Il Sung (1912-1994) and elected on August 25, had mutually hostile dogmatic principles yet both sides wished to expand their power over the whole peninsula.

When discussing Stalin's role in the Korean War, it is valuable to perceive how the Korean conflict evolved. As it is known, there was a goal of reunification of Korea across the peninsula. It was not necessarily a power trip for the Allied countries but a prerogative to support the regimes with similar political ideologies that struggles internally. American historian A. Millett<sup>4</sup> points out the suffering of Koreans due to geographical reasons in 1945-50, *changma* (rainy seasons) as a chief military and strategic factor as they drained the agricultural opportunities from the nation. From a broad historical perspective, the conflict progression in 1950 was unprecedented. Some would argue that an attack on June 25, 1950, as both Koreas were provocative to each other. North Koreans assumed that seizing Seoul from the South would break ROK's army spirit and therefore marched through the buffer border. Yet, to DPRK's surprise, the South Korean troops did not capitulate and the war transpired.

## **Investigation on the nature of Stalin's decision**

When analyzing Stalin's nature of approval of the attack, Korean War historians predominantly mention the struggles of the Cold War, the changed international situation, which involved drawing of new decrees, the relationship dynamics between the Soviet Union and North Korea, and the USSR's foreign policy in Asia.

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<sup>4</sup> Millett, A. (2020). *THE KOREAN WAR: Which one? When?*

The nature of the relationship between the USSR and North Korea has been viewed through various lenses. Three main historiographies are based on the same pretense as the historical analysis of Korean history: geographical association of the historians, namely Soviet (Russian), Western and Korean. Each one of them examines the Korean War either with a revisionist or orthodox approach. The aspects of the Russian-Korean relationship have been a focus of Russian who presumably favored the Russian interests in their historical studies. The revisionist approach after the release of Soviet confidential documents offers more scrutiny to Stalin's decisions regarding the Korean war. The Western perspective focuses on issues of the unification of two Koreas and the confrontational relationship of the USSR and the USA, where orthodox historians show the USSR in a more despondent light. Meanwhile, Korean historians mainly focus on internal problems that divided the Korea and the Korean struggles.

### Priorities of the USSR foreign policy in respect to Korea

To determine the views of Joseph Stalin on the DPRK's invasion of the border with the Southerners, it is necessary to determine whether the Korean region was prioritized in the Soviet policies. Korean war was a bloodthirsty civil and world conflict. As it goes for Stalin, an assertive leader of an influential country, Korea is not known as the primary focus of his politics in the 1940s.

In American-Soviet relationship, there was a pattern in the Soviet foreign policy of retreat and compromise that supported the perception of the Soviet strategies up to 1950 as non-aggressive. Stalin hoped to consolidate and develop benefits gained through the post-WW2 conferences, whilst also to plan a cautious expansion into Turkey and Iran<sup>5</sup>. Whenever possible the Soviet Union's initiative was to avoid direct conflict with the United States.

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<sup>5</sup> Zubok, V. (1997). *Stalin's Plans and Russian Archives*.

Thus, the confrontation advanced by the North Korean invasion was not aligned with USSR's principles. Yet, Zhihua, the Chinese history scholar, indicates the establishment of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in 1949 upon Truman's request of the U.N. military assistance in fighting communist spread and 1948 Marshall plan of aiding resistance in Europe changed Stalin's directives in 1950<sup>6</sup>. The increasing Western influence in predominantly Soviet sections of Eastern Europe agitated the Soviet Union's concerns of their dominant position in the world. After 1949, Stalin's policy toward the USA became more aggressive and made the Soviets more prone to counteract Truman's actions in the Pacific region.

The Soviet leader focused on the realistic approaches to assure the national interests and security instead of offensive strategies. Revisionist historical critics commented on a "peacemaker approach"<sup>7</sup> when it concerned Stalin's East Asian foreign policy in the 1940s. This implies that to maintain the security of the victorious position of the USSR after WW2 and to regain the economic stability without extraneous interference, the Soviet state's agenda consisted of ideas of peaceful coexistence and world revolution<sup>8</sup>. The foreign policy that aimed to protect national security of the Soviet state toward USA and the Western globe and follow the agreements drawn in the Allied conferences.

Endorsing the Korean conflict, therefore, could have demonstrated the opposite affinity. Korea was an example of a significant strategic region where the interests of global powers clashed. The model of ethnically identical populations coexisting in the frame of counter exclusive political regimes was threatening for the countries which systems were similar to one of those political systems that could experience a downfall. Yet, according to

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<sup>6</sup> Zhihua, S. (2000). *Sino-Soviet Relations and the Origins of the Korean War: Stalin's Strategic Goals in the Far East*

<sup>7</sup> Millett, A. (2020). *THE KOREAN WAR: Which one? When?*

<sup>8</sup> Zhihua, S. (2012). *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s (Cold War History)*

Zhihua, the Soviet Union mostly aimed to expand “the Soviet Union’s buffer zone” in Korea, not to seize power over the whole land as Korean matter was not a pressing one for the Soviets.<sup>9</sup> Analogously, the American historian O’Neill<sup>10</sup> claims that in reality Stalin agreed to limit the disposition of the Soviet Red Army by the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in Korea because the Soviet policy objective considered Korean situation as of a minor importance to the benefit of the Soviet Union in 1945.

One of the aspects often mentioned to propagate the conflict on the peninsula and reflect on Stalin's attitude towards Koreans is Stalin’s authorization to legitimize the North Korean government in the 1940s when the first electoral process was enacted by the North Korean Sovietization. Sovietization happened in the eastern European countries. According to the revisionist idea of Zubok V., nothing indicates Stalin’s wish to “attack the West” through North Korea or any other Asian land<sup>11</sup>. Zubok alleges that Stalin rather anticipated the Soviet domination in Eastern Europe without a direct confrontation with the United States. Juxtaposed to the issues of adapting the Soviet regime (“Sovietization”) in the North Korean population, Syngman Rhee’s rise to power was also aided by the Americans. Similarly to the Soviet aid of North Koreans, the U.S. was supporting Syngman Rhee and the self-established government in the South that fought against the South Communist guerillas led by Pak Honyong<sup>12</sup>.

Historians like Agov A. consider North Korea to be a mediating factor for the socialist system and refer to it as “an integral part of the international socialist system”<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Zhihua, S. (2000). *Sino-Soviet Relations and the Origins of the Korean War: Stalin’s Strategic Goals in the Far East*

<sup>10</sup> O’Neill, M. (2000). *Soviet Involvement in the Korean War: A New View from the Soviet-era Archives*.

<sup>11</sup> Zubok, V. (1997). *Stalin’s Plans and Russian Archives*.

<sup>12</sup> Haruki, W. (1998). *The Korean war, Stalin’s policy, and Japan*.

<sup>13</sup> Agov, A. (2013). *North Korea’s Alliances and the Unfinished Korean War*.

Arguably, it was an aftereffect of being in a war-scarred country, as Korean people feared the repetition of the Japanese rule on their lands and attempted to establish their independence with the support of governments opposing Japan's claim on Korean peninsula.

### Korean dynamics with Soviets and Americans prior to the war

In terms of the Cold War, a sign of a premeditated approval was the USSR's military and financial support of DPRK. Stalin did affirm North Korean prerogative and provided support for it before and during the war. North was dependent on Russian supplies and technology. The DPRK steadily integrated into Soviet system through economic support provided by Stalin (by 1949, the USSR's fraction comprised 90% of DPRK's foreign trade). In 1949, after Americans withdrew their troops from the South, the Soviets supplied the North with the "defensive" military assistance of "100 military aircraft, 87 tanks, 57 armored vehicles, 102 self-propelled cannons, 44 collapsible landing craft and small rubber boats, ammunition and other military equipment".<sup>14</sup> Conversely, this was organized to minimize the Soviet involvement in the Korean struggles and Moscow's policy aimed to peacefully unify Korea through agitating the South communist revolt.

To say that Stalin had his mind eagerly set for the active offensive attacks in Korea is to ignore the influence of the Korean leaders on the situation. In 1949, the year before the war outbreak, the multiple occasions of aggression and enmity on the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in 1949 were showcased from both sides of the border. Adding to that, Russian revisionist historian, Balkansky<sup>15</sup> comments that Syngman Rhee's rhetoric consisted of many violent threats directed to Kim Il-Sung's leadership and the DPRK party and Kim Il-Sung being a leader who acted rashly and according to his own principles. So, Kim decided to start the invasion on his

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<sup>14</sup> Zhihua, S. (2012). *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s (Cold War History)*

<sup>15</sup> Balkansky, A. (2011) Ким Ир Сен [Kim Il Sung]

own volition, as DPRK tried to incorporate the policy of Juche, i.e., self-reliance, and confront as a retaliation to the ROK's intimidations. There was a possibility of the attack being sketched without detailed consultancy with the USSR, as the plan that the North Korean leader presented to the Soviets could have been deceptive and overly optimistic: Kim pictured that the Southerners would support the communist revolt and minimized the American indulgence in the Korean matter, while neither of premises was fulfilled later on. Kurbanov<sup>16</sup> also touches on the topic of the importance of ideology to the Soviet politics, as the historian connotes that the actions adopted by the USSR were the results of the support of the spirits of the communist comrades across the globe. This way, Stalin's ideals were natural decrees in ratifying Kim Il Sung's plan of actions, even if the Soviet Union was opposed to the aggressive course of events.

The Soviet advisories helped Kim to draw his plan of the invasion of the ROK in 1950. That could elucidate the eagerness of the USSR to support the invasion. Some historians mention that this only done in the retrospect that the South would not resist the communist movement and the battle will be short-lived. Due to the miscalculation of the political leaders, the contrary happened.

Stalin's reluctance towards the DPRK's invasion is seemingly present in his condescending regard of Kim Il-Sung. This is mainly documented in the minutes of the Moscow-Pyongyang conferences in 1949. Western scholars focus on the Kremlin's functions as the most prevailing in orchestrating the invasion of the South with the purpose of capturing Seoul. Even though Stalin demonstrated support of Kim Il-Sung's leadership on the Korean peninsula in the long-term, his reluctancy towards the vile attack executed on June 25, 1950, stems from the USSR's adherence to the post-war agreements with the West and their

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<sup>16</sup> Kurbanov, S. O. (2018). История Кореи с древности до начала XXI века. [Istoriya Korei. S drevnosti do nachala XXI veka]

acknowledgement of the ramifications of the Berlin Blockade. The Soviet Union was at risk of breaching the international treaties with the USA and others. The Soviet leader' aimed to maintain the USSR's international supremacy position. There was an inclination of reluctance towards the offensive up until the early 1950. As Millet A.<sup>17</sup> mentions that, after first refusing Kim Il Sung's request of help with the invasion, Stalin then lists the condition of eradicating the United States' 5th Regimental Combat Team [RCT], the core team responsible for problems of security of the U.S. troops, as one of requirements for his approval. So, the Soviet Union, besides being cautious, also employed the strategies of weakening the American hold in Korea.

### “Changed international situation”

When discussing the components of the *changed international situation*, historians reference a revisited Sino-Soviet Treaty, the improvement of the Soviet nuclear ammunition, and the expansion of communism further in the East without interference from the West. According to Kurbanov<sup>18</sup>, the “changed international situation” has been a complex factor that affected Stalin's decision on the authorization of the North Korean offensive. On top of that, Torkunov A.<sup>19</sup>, a Russian scholar of the Korean conflict, argued that the phrase “the changed international situation” refers above all to the Communist victory in China.

The further development of the Korean conflict and the Soviet intervention in it was agitated by the US scope of defense that could have pushed Stalin's judgment in favor of the attack. The previous reluctance of Stalin against North Korean offensive tactics was overshadowed upon hearing about the assumed non-interference strategy of Americans in the

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<sup>17</sup> Millett, A. (2020). *THE KOREAN WAR: Which one? When?*

<sup>18</sup> Kurbanov, S. O. (2018). *История Кореи с древности до начала XXI века*. [Istoriya Korei. S drevnosti do nachala XXI veka].

<sup>19</sup> Torkunov A.V. (2000). *Загадочная Война: корейский конфликт 1950-1953 годов* [The Mysterious War: The Korean Conflict, 1950-1953].

Korean conflict. This was deduced from Dean Acheson's speech at the National Press Club (1950) on the defensive perimeter of the USA that omitted Korea. As there was the Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons and the hanging threat of NATO objectives, Stalin thought that American military intervention would not be launched if DPRK decided to proceed with the invasion and sanctioned the provisional support for the attack. O'Neill<sup>20</sup> analyzed the situational tension of Korean War and suggested following factors as their causes: *“historical accident, bad timing, and diplomatic blundering as it was calculation”*. Such a statement amplifies the misinterpretation and miscalculation of the Soviet leader that guided his approval of the invasion.

The additional element of the supposed reluctance of Stalin was comprised of his tactics regarding Chinese alliance. Korea as a mediator of the Sino-Soviet relations and the power struggle zone. Before 1949, the DPRK was only loosely a part of the Soviet system, yet with the victory of CCP that established the Chinese government as People's Republic of China (PRC), North Korea briefly integrated into the international socialist system. This helped to establish the bond between North Korea and Mao's PRC. This bond was determined both as a concern for Stalin and a tool of manipulation of socialist sentiments in case the Soviet Union was looking for a supportive ally in the future after the relationship between the USSR and the USA started to deteriorate. Additionally, the new Sino-Soviet treaty (1950) was drawn after the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance (1945) and induced a new strategy for Korea where the USSR would control Inchon and Pusan's ports and Mao and Stalin would support military North Koreans against Japanese troops or the South confrontations. So, according to Zhihua, as to avoid a direct confrontation with the Americans and to divert the attention from the Soviet involvement, before Stalin permitted the North Korean invasion in April 1950, he made sure that Kim Il Sung referred to Mao

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<sup>20</sup> O'Neill, M. (2000). Soviet Involvement in the Korean War: A New View from the Soviet-era Archives.

Zedong as the official supporter and the deciding factor of the invasion, thus discreetly approving of the DPRK's attack.

## **Conclusion**

Stalin's position on the invasion of the ROK by the time it happened was mainly affirmative. To summarize, Stalin's reluctance to support the invasion has been documented to be greater in the first half of the 1940s as an accumulation of his retreat and relatively peaceful foreign policies for the sake of national security. However, the increasing tensions between the USSR and other countries after WW2 suggest suitable reasoning for Stalin to engage in the aggressive attacks in Korea despite Korean peninsula not being a primary focus of the Soviet Union's Asian policy. However, the extent of approval was not divulged, thus many sources lead to examine Stalin's deliberately changed trajectory in Korea and the support of the DPRK as the Soviets' being in favor of the North Korean attack. As it also was a great opportunity to test the strength of the Sino-Soviet relationship and alliance, the misinterpretation of the American prerogative in the Pacific region potentially decreased the overall level of reluctance of Stalin towards the attack on South Korea. Even so, in 1950, the political pressure between the USA and USSR deepened due to multiple political and economic factors, some of them were the emergence of nuclear weaponry in the Soviet Union and the suppression of the Soviet expansion by Truman's administration from 1945. The Cold War tensions are greatly linked as impacting features of both the outbreak and the outcome of the Korean war and therefore there is no denying of Stalin's decision to side with DPRK as a result of multiple conflicting situations of bipolar political climate.

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