

KOREAN WAR – WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE?

Stalin and the USSR.

It was, and is still, generally assumed in the West that Stalin was responsible for the Korean War.

Thus Truman on 27th June 1950 said that "*the attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations, and will now use armed invasion and war*". On British advice, his original references to "*Soviet directed Communism*" were omitted, on the grounds that it would make it harder for the USSR to extricate itself, should it decide to do so. Chip Bohlen, the American expert on Russia, considered the war "*typical*" of Stalin's indirect approach. The British Foreign Office considered it "*virtually certain*" that Stalin and the Russians had connived at the attack, if they had not actually instigated it.

Possible reasons for an attack. (There is no agreement among the experts.)

- An attempt to make up for the failure and defeat in the Berlin Blockade by attacking in an area where the US was unlikely to act. In 1950, the US Secretary of State Dean Acheson had affirmed that "*Korea was excluded from the (US) defense perimeter*"
- An attempt to regain prestige and influence among Asian Communists following the failure to aid Mao Zedong 1946-1949
- General Omar Bradley, Senator William Fulbright and others regarded the attack as primarily diversionary, to preoccupy the US while the Russians advanced elsewhere, for example in Iran (the main British fear), the Middle East, Germany or Yugoslavia; the Hungarian Bela Kiraly later said that he headed a Hungarian force which would have invaded Yugoslavia if the US had not taken a stand over Korea
- Instead, or in addition, it might have been intended as a diversion while the Communist Chinese conquered Taiwan.
- A probe to test US resolve in a soft spot (although surely Iran 1946 and Berlin 1948-9 had already done this). General Douglas MacArthur was convinced that a Communist victory would mean Soviet attacks in Europe.
- An effort to control an area strategically important for the USSR and Communist China, especially in view of the US reconstruction of Japan. Control of Korea would give security against Japan, and at the same time, give added influence over Communist China. To John Foster Dulles, increasingly important in the State Department, the USSR was primarily influenced by Japanese revival. Korea, just 90 miles from Japan, was the traditional jumping off point for an attack on the mainland.
- A first step to control of South East Asia, which was rich in raw materials (for example, 90% of the world's rubber, 600/0 of its tin, oil). It was not so much that the USSR needed these but the fact that the West did and could be denied access.
- According to the Russian historian Lev Kopelev, the Korean War was provoked by Stalin primarily to involve Communist China in a local war with the US, which would weaken China and increase its dependence on the USSR.
- A good chance of success, as the US was apparently not interested in the area
- Spread Communism.

However, Western revisionist historians question Stalin's responsibility.

- It is not absolutely clear that it was North Korea that actually began the war.
- If an attack on Korea had been planned, would Jacob Malik, the Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations in New York, have walked out of the UN from January to August 1950 (in protest at US opposition to Communist Chinese membership of the UN), for the UN was an important propaganda forum?
- There was none of the usual propaganda build-up before a Soviet move. Admittedly, on 7th June 1950, Pyongyang had called over the radio for reunification elections on 5th August 1950, excluding Rhee and his associates.
- North Korea was strong on "juchē" (Korean for self-reliance) and distrust of foreigners, including Russians, who had traditionally competed with the Japanese (and Chinese) for domination of China.
- According to Khrushchev's Memoirs in 1971 Kim Il Sung was responsible for the war although Stalin gave his blessing.
- Peter Lowe in *"The Origins of the Korean War"* points out that Stalin must have known about the stronger position the US was beginning to take in 1950 with regard to Korea because he was receiving information from his agents Burgess, Maclean and Philby. For example, he would surely have known about the US National Security Council Document Number 68 of April 1950 advocating a policy of global containment of the USSR. Lowe concluded that *"on balance, it is unlikely that the Russians manipulated the North Koreans in June 1950, but it is still a possibility"*.

None the less, the consensus among historians is that Stalin was responsible.

- The deciding factor is that Kim Il Sung could not have acted without Stalin's go-ahead (Andre Fontaine, in *Le Monde* 1978). Military experts point out that the Russians must have been involved; for example, the North was dependent on Russia for supplies, and radio intercepts by the BBC and others show that Russian advisers, 15 per division, were withdrawn a week after fighting began. (To avoid trouble, or because it seemed they were no longer needed?)
- Revisionists naturally argue that what the Russians provided for defense was used by the North Koreans for an attack, which once launched, the Russians had to support.

The United States

(President Truman 1945-53, Secretaries of State James Byrnes 1945-January 1947, George Marshall January 1947-January 1949, Dean Acheson 1949-53.)

- The USSR and North Korea blamed the US and the South Koreans for the start of hostilities on 25th June 1950. However, there is no evidence that the US organized South Koreans into attacking. According to the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai (Chou En-lai), the puppet South Korean government attacked the North at US instigation, to give the US a pretext for invading Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. According to some sources, General MacArthur, notoriously pro-Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek), provoked the North Koreans to get the policy of containment extended to Asia. All this is highly unlikely in view of the obvious US unpreparedness. US forces in Japan had been run down to 70% of full strength, largely because there was no concept then of a limited war. In addition, there was the rapid North Korean advance, which suggests North Korean preparedness.
- However, the US did unintentionally encourage the war by leading the Communists to expect that there would be no US involvement. US troops had been withdrawn in

1949, there were the public statements that Korea was outside the US defense perimeter, and, as the Republican Senator Robert Taft emphasized, the US had not built up South Korean defenses.

- The US had also lost the chance immediately after 1945 to settle the problem by accepting the People's Committees and co-operating with Yo Un-hyong. Instead, the US had supported, and continued to support, Syngman Rhee.
- In 1950, the US adopted a new and more forceful policy with regard to Korea, as part of a firmer commitment to containment. Thus, for example, steps were made at reconciliation with Japan, culminating in the signature in 1951 of the Treaty of San Francisco. Possibly the reason for the firmer stand was the growing awareness that the Vietminh in Vietnam were Communist dominated, which, coming after Berlin Crisis of 1948-1949 and Mao's victory in China, made it seem as if the world was threatened by Communism; US policy makers had no wish to repeat the 1938 Munich Agreement by appeasing Communism.
- Possibly Truman and his advisers were influenced by Senator McCarthy and accusations of "*sympathy towards Communism*" (Republican Senator Robert Taft) and the effect this would have on the 1950 Congressional midterm and 1952 presidential elections. Clearly, the new US policy of action changed a local civil war into a wider international conflict.

North Korea.

- The North Korean leader, Kim Il Sung perhaps ordered the attack without consulting the Russians (like the Egyptian attack on Israel in 1973). North Koreans were certainly nationally minded and distrustful of foreigners, including Russians.
- He would have been influenced by the obvious weakness of South Korean forces, by the Japanese revival, and by US assertions that Korea was not in the US "*defense perimeter*". Bruce Cumming (in "*Child of Conflict: the Korean-American relationship 1949-53*", written in 1981) concludes that Kim Il Sung was the main agent of the war. He admits there is no hard evidence and is forced to rely on facts such as the notebook of a captured North Korean mechanic showing that planes in mid-June were being prepared for an attack and were not receiving just routine maintenance, thereby indicating that the North Koreans were not responding on 25th June to a South Korean attack.

South Korea.

- According to the North Koreans, they were merely responding to an attack by South Korea. The US journalist, I.F. Stone, in his 1952 book "*Hidden History of the Korean War*" asked whether Syngman Rhee deliberately provoked the North by border incidents as his popularity was waning and he hoped that a war would bring US aid and consequently unification; he was 75 years old in 1950 and was an old man in a hurry to make his mark in history. Possibly, he was encouraged by Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek), who was disappointed by the US failure to help reconquer the Mainland and to give what he considered adequate aid for the defense of Taiwan; a war would push the US into giving what he wanted.
- Stone's thesis had been taken up by later historians, such as Gabriel Kolko, who in the 1960s, tried to demonstrate that the North Korean attack was a response to provocative incursions over the 38th Parallel by South Koreans who withdrew luring the North Koreans into following. Evidence to support the above is very limited.

However, 17th-21st June 1950, John Foster Dulles, famous for his promise, never fulfilled, to "*roll back Communism*" and at the time a high-ranking State Department official, visited South Korea and allegedly told Syngman Rhee "*You are not alone*". According to the British envoy in Tokyo, Dulles told him, with obvious satisfaction that Syngman Rhee was looking forward to a time when he could invade the North.

- Exactly what happened along the length of the 38th Parallel on 25th June is unclear, but according to UN observers, ROK forces were "*entirely for defense*" and "in no condition to carry out an attack on a large scale against the forces of the North", which in some places had won salients to the south of the parallel. This of course does not preclude a senile old man trying to lure the North Koreans. However, the rapid North Korean success and the obvious South Korean unpreparedness would seem to support the traditional view that the South Koreans were acting only in defense.

China – The People's Republic of China (Communist China).

- Did Mao push Kim Il Sung, hoping to preoccupy the US while the Chinese Communists occupied Taiwan, or perhaps Tibet? Tibet was occupied in October 1950, but was US intervention so rapid that Beijing (Peking) had no time to put into operation the plan for the conquest of Taiwan? All this is unlikely as Beijing had enough problems without adding more. There is certainly no evidence, only surmise. Of course, Mao's victory in 1949 in the Chinese Civil War may have encouraged Kim Il Sung and/or Stalin to adopt a more forceful policy. Alternatively, Mao's success may have pushed the US into a more assertive stance.

Republic of China (Nationalist China - Taiwan).

- It has been alleged that Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) encouraged the South Koreans to attack in order to divert Beijing (Peking) and perhaps bring him more US support, but there is no evidence.

US involvement

- On the outbreak of the war, the US considered the situation so serious that US forces from Japan were committed. However, there was no military danger to the US and it was a political decision not to appease, and to show US allies that it could be relied upon. The US was clearly taken by surprise, not least because it had assumed that any war after 1945 would be total. US forces were apparently committed not with the intention of driving the North Koreans back but in expectation that the Communist forces would withdraw when it was clear that the US meant business. Dean Acheson likened the situation to 1939, and insisted that strong action should be taken. Thus the US intervened in a civil war, which the North would otherwise have quickly won, and transformed the conflict into an international war of attrition.