

What or who caused the KOREAN WAR?

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Abstract. The Korean War, which broke out in June 1950, stands as a significant historical event with profound implications for contemporary global politics. In the aftermath of World War II, the Korean Peninsula, emerging from Japanese rule, was partitioned along the 38th parallel line into two ideologically opposing states. The North, led by Kim Il-Sung and supported by the Soviet Union, and the South, under Syngman Rhee with backing from the United States, epitomized the ideological divide of the Cold War. This division set the stage for a conflict that extended beyond the Korean Peninsula, reflecting the broader global struggle between capitalism and communism.

Keywords: Korean War, Kim Il-Sung, Korean Peninsula.

1. Introduction

The Korean War's unresolved legacy continues to impact contemporary geopolitics. The ongoing division of the Korean Peninsula and the periodic tensions between North and South Korea are a direct consequence of the war. These tensions are not just a regional issue but have global implications, involving major powers like the United States and China. Even today, the Korean Peninsula remains one of the most heavily militarized regions in the world, with the Demilitarized Zone serving as a stark reminder of the ongoing hostilities. The frequent military provocations and nuclear tests by North Korea, coupled with the joint military exercises between South Korea and the United States, continue to exacerbate tensions. These actions are often seen as a direct continuation of the conflict that was never formally concluded, as the Korean War ended with an armistice, not a peace treaty.

After the end of the Korean War, it has always been a heated research topic among historians. Among others, the origin of the war has attracted much contemporary scholarly attention. Analysis of archival documents, such as diplomatic telegrams, reveals the standpoints and roles played by the political leaders at that time. The main viewpoints concerning the cause of the Korean War held by different scholars can be divided into three groups: the personal willpower of Kim Il-Sung, the instigation of the Soviet Union, and the overreaction of the United States. This essay will examine all three viewpoints based on published articles. This essay argues that the actions of Kim Il-Sung played the most important role in the outbreak of the Korean War, and the support of Stalin played a secondary role. Kim always harbored a determination to unite the Korean Peninsula, and a series of military aid from the Soviet Union further facilitated his military actions, which finally led to the outbreak of the war.

Why did the Korean War start? The origins of the Korean War have intrigued historians for decades. Eighty years after its end, scholars have still been issuing their different opinions on it. Different historians hold varied views, but these views can be divided into three groups.

2. Literature review

Firstly, some historians believe that the foreign policy of the United States of America was the most important factor that contributed to the outbreak of the war. In his *Korea: The Limited War*, David Rees, a British scholar, and writer specializing in Cold War history, contends that the Korean War was a result of America's containment policy. He emphasizes that the war was not locally based but deeply intertwined with global politics and the ideological struggle between communism and capitalism. I. F. Stone, an American investigative journalist known for his skepticism toward official narratives, claims in his book *The Hidden History of the Korean War* that the United States, along

with the South Korean government, deliberately brought the war to North Korea. He believes that the US played a crucial role in the outbreak of the war [1]. In the same vein, Robert T. Oliver, a former adviser to the South Korean government, argues in *Why War Came in Korea* that Secretary of State Dean Acheson's speech in January 1950 was the cause of the war. As the speech excluded South Korea from the US's "defense perimeter" in Asia, North Korea assumed that they were able to conquer South Korea without facing US interventions [2]. Bruce Cumings, an American historian of East Asia known for his extensive research on the Korean War, examined post-war Korean American relations in his work *Child of Conflict*. Through a thorough examination of primary sources in the National Archives, Cumings analyzed American policies in the Far East and argued that the war was an American creation [3].

On the contrary, other historians believe that Russia played a major role in the early days of the Korean War. In his *The Korea Knot*, Carl Berger claims that the attack on North Korea was the Soviet Union's attempt to dominate the Korean Peninsula and neutralize Japan [4]. Charles E. Bohlen, an American diplomat, ambassador, and expert on the Soviet Union, maintains that Moscow was responsible for the Korean War. The North Korean army was trained and armed by the Soviet Union, and they could not initiate an attack without the support and permission of Moscow. Likewise, Sergey Radchenko, a scholar specializing in the foreign policies of Russia and China, portrays the USSR as a central player. In *Unwanted Visionaries: The Soviet Collapse in Asia*, he states that Stalin's support was pivotal for Kim II-Sung's decision to invade the South [5]. Similar to Radchenko, Stanley Sandler suggests in *The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished* that Soviet approval, along with Soviet-provided training and equipment, was crucial for North Korea's decision to invade. The book claims that Stalin's strategic considerations played a significant role in the outbreak of the war [6].

However, the majority of historians believe that conflicts between the two countries on the Korean Peninsula, as well as the will of Kim II-Sung, were the most crucial reason for the outbreak of the Korean War. To begin with, Wilbur W. Hitchcock, a former member of the US military government in Korea, disagrees that Russia should bear the responsibility of initiating the Korean War. In *Current History*, he states that the attack was under Kim II-Sung's order without the Soviet Union's instruction. Wilbur W. Hitchcock also argues that North Korea's military actions, which were not assisted by the Soviet Union, accounted for the outbreak of the war [7]. In *The Strained Alliance*, Robert R. Simmons contends that the Korean War should be viewed as a civil war. He also disagrees that the Soviet Union started the war; rather, he believes that the political conditions on the peninsula made Kim II-Sung invade South Korea without noting Moscow or Peking [8]. Similarly, in *The Origins of the Korean War*, Bruce Cummings from the University of Washington also treats the Korean War as a civil war. He suggests that the war should be regarded as a continuation of the civil struggle that began in 1945 [9]. In *China's Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited*, Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai state that China was not informed of Kim II-Sung's plan to attack South Korea. Kim only informed the Soviet Union of his plan because he thought that the Soviet Union was the only country that could help him. Thus, Kim should bear the largest share of responsibility since he was the one who set up the military plan and sought assistance from other countries [10]. In addition, Allan R. Millett, a prominent military historian, argues that Kim II-Sung, with the support of the Soviets and Chinese, pursued a premeditated plan of unification through military aggression. In *The War for Korea, 1950-1951: They Came from the North*, he places the blame on North Korean leadership for its outbreak [11]. Likewise, William Stueck, an American historian, holds a similar opinion in *The Korean War: An International History*. He presents a more international perspective on the Korean War, discussing the interests and roles of other foreign powers. Nevertheless, he underscores the aggressive intentions of North Korea as a primary cause of the war [12].

3. Analysis

The Korean Peninsula was already filled with tensions long before the Korean War broke out in June 1950. After the end of World War II, the Korean Peninsula was divided along the 38th parallel. The Russians occupied the north side, and the United States occupied the south. By the year 1949, two

new states had formed on the peninsula. The anti-communist dictator Syngman Rhee was the ruler of the south, who enjoyed the reluctant support from the US government. In the north, the communist dictator Kim Il-Sung received more enthusiastic support from the Soviet Union. Neither of the two dictators was satisfied with the territorial division alongside the 38th parallel, and disputes over the border of the two states popped up occasionally. The two states' different ideologies and the conflicts and competition between the US and the Soviet Union brought the tensions on the peninsula to the next level.

Kim Il-Sung decided to resort to military campaigns to solve the problems mentioned earlier. On March 11, 1949, V. Molotov sent a telegram to Stalin to report an agreement made between the government of the Soviet Union and North Korea. In that agreement, the Soviet Union decided to offer a loan to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, with which the latter would pay for the military equipment, as well as other equipment and materials, that were being delivered to North Korea. The agreement suggests that the loan had to be paid off within three years, and in the meantime, North Korea should lay an annual interest of 2% to the Soviet Union. Also, the USSR agreed to send military equipment to North Korea between 1949 and 1952. Kim Il-Sung's determination to wage a war against South Korea was clearly shown in this telegram in 1949: he had been preparing for the war by buying military equipment more than a year before its actual outbreak, and more importantly, he purchased with a loan. Based on the telegram, it remains unknown whether the Soviet Union supported a war between the two countries on the peninsula. But one can easily tell from the telegram that the Soviet Union provided crucial military support for the North, and they did it to benefit themselves financially.

With the military equipment in place, Kim Il-Sung decided to take one step further by proposing partial military operations to the Soviet Union. However, as stated in Tunkin's telegram, the Soviet Union kept a skeptical attitude toward Kim Il-Sung's proposal, which resorted to violence to solve the problems on the peninsula. The telegram first reiterated Kim's thoughts. Although he was unable to get support from China due to its internal problems, Kim Il-Sung still believed that a war against the South would be supported by his people and that the people in the South would also support him. Also, Tunkin's telegram talked about the current condition of the North Korean army and Kim's military plan to initiate a striking attack on the South and demoralize it. As mentioned in the telegram, Kim proposed "to destroy the two regiments located there (Ongjin peninsula), to occupy the territory of the peninsula and the territory to the east of it, for example to Kaidzio [Gaeseong], and then to see what to do further". Even though there were plenty of insufficiencies in the Northern Army, Kim still held that the Northern Army was superior to that of the South. Then, the telegram expressed the perspective of the Soviet Union. The Soviets thought that the northern army was not strong enough to carry out Kim's proposed military operation. Also, a war between the North and the South may bring the US in, which is disadvantageous for North Korea and the Soviet Union. Tunkin stated that a war as Kim suggested was inadvisable because the northerners did not have the capability of ending the war quickly. Thus, what can be inferred from the telegram is Kim's strong will to start a war and the Soviet Union's opposing attitude. Kim proposed a full battle plan to the Soviet Union; however, the Soviets were skeptical about the Northern Army. Also, the Soviets thought a war against the South would drag the United States in, which would harm their benefits on the peninsula. As the telegram demonstrates, the Soviet Union only played a minor role in this period. Their financial ties with North Korea did not convince them to assist the latter directly in war.

Another telegram from Politburo (the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) to the Soviet Ambassador in Korea further confirms the Soviet Union's skeptical attitude toward Kim Il-Sung's plan to initiate a war against the South. The telegram focused on the feasibility of beginning a military assault on the South at once and concluded that it was necessary to make more preparations for such an operation. As mentioned in the telegram, it is "impossible to consider that the Peoples' Army is prepared for such an attack," and it will only turn into a situation that is disadvantageous for North Korea. So, from a military perspective, an unprepared military attack on the South should not be permitted. Also, to defeat the South, the North

would need to win support from people living in the South. At its best, the Southern Koreans' uprising would significantly contribute to the success of the Northern army. North Korea had done very little to mobilize the Southern people, to create political impact and movements that would lay the foundation to overthrow the Southern government. The telegram summarizes and evaluates Kim's military plans, suggesting that North Korea was not yet ready from both military and political perspectives. To ensure the feasibility of a military attack on the South, the North needed to make necessary preparations, promote people's uprisings against the Southern government, and strengthen the Northern army. Different from Tunkin's telegram, the telegram from the Politburo to the ambassadors in North Korea demonstrated the attitude of the Soviet government. Even though the Soviet Union sold military equipment to North Korea, they still held that the North was not yet fully prepared for the war.

In the early months of 1950, the world watched as tensions in the Korean Peninsula reached a boiling point. Despite the ambiguous attitude of the Soviet government in the preceding years, this year witnessed a series of direct military aid from the Soviet Union to North Korea that provided essential means to start a war. Although Stalin refused Kim Il-Sung's repeated requests to invade South Korea, things had changed. By 1950, Stalin saw an opportunity to build on Communist interests in Asia and to relieve some of the pressure of the Soviet Union in Europe to sustain its sphere of influence. Also, he wanted to take advantage of Mao's successful revolution in China to expand the Soviet Union's influence in East Asia. Beyond economic gain, Stalin now saw more benefits he could reap from the Korean Peninsula. If North Korea was able to conquer the South, Stalin would be able to spread the communist ideology and his influence to more countries and regions.

Kim Il-Sung, a charismatic political figure with a fierce determination, had a singular vision: a united Korea. He believed that the time was ripe for action and that the South, with its simmering discontent against the authoritarian regime of Syngman Rhee, would welcome him as a liberator. But Kim knew that he couldn't act alone. He needed allies to wage a war on the peninsula, and his gaze naturally turned to the Soviet Union. In a telegram from Pyongyang to Moscow on March 9, 1950, Kim Il-Sung asked for assistance from the Soviet Union. In the telegram, Kim asked for military-technical equipment in the amount of 120-150 million rubles, to fully equip the Northern army with advanced weapons. In return, Kim promised to deliver tons of gold and silver and fifteen thousand tons of monazite concentrate. This telegram suggests that Kim Il-Sung was eager to start a war, and his will to build a strong alliance with the Soviet Union. Kim proposed to exchange mineral materials for weapons from the Soviets. Also, the telegram shows the development of a closer relationship between the two countries. North Korea started to exchange with the Soviet Union for weapons rather than buy them. And this relationship was significant for North Korea because now they could get advanced weapons and military equipment from a major power of the world.

On March 18, 1950, Stalin sent a telegram to Kim Il-Sung via Shtykov. It can be seen from the telegram that Kim sent two telegrams to Stalin in the preceding weeks, asking for military and industrial assistance and equipment. In the telegram, Stalin agreed to both of the demands. After receiving the indicated amount of lead from North Korea, Stalin assured Kim to provide the materials and equipment he wanted and to send specialists to North Korea. Also, he promised to deliver arms, ammunitions, and technical equipment to the Northern army. The assistance from the Soviet Union mentioned in this telegram was vital for North Korea. Compared to the South, the North was not technologically advanced, and thus they lacked equipment that could strengthen their army. The technical specialists and military equipment from the Soviet Union could partially solve the problem of an unprepared army. Furthermore, it could give North Korea some advantage over the South in terms of weapons and technologies, and this advantage has been proved in many major wars in the 20th century to be crucial to the final victory. This telegram indicates the role of the Soviet Union in the pre-war period: it provided North Korea with essential military equipment that made Kim Il-Sung, who had always harbored a strong will to unify the Korean Peninsula, more determined to start a war against the South.

Not long after, Kim Il-Sung thought that enough preparations for the war had been made, and two telegrams in the following days strengthened his determination to wage the war as soon as possible. Shytykov sent a telegram to Vysinsky on May 30, 1950. In the telegram, Shytykov claimed that North Korea was well-prepared for the war, which turned out to have accelerated the North's military operations. Shytykov repeated what Kim told him: North Korea would finish organizing the army by 1 June, their infantry was fully prepared to conduct combat operations, and seven infantry divisions in a total of ten were already completely ready. Kim then explained that the Southerners did not have sufficient information about the Northern Army, so they could take advantage of this information gap. After an analysis of multiple factors including the weather, Kim proposed to start the military operation between 8 and 10 June. Then, Shytykov included his own opinion after a discussion with other key figures of the Soviet Union. They believed that North Korea was ready for an attack on the South, but more discussion was needed to confirm the best time for such an operation. At the end of the telegram, he mentioned Kim's urgent need for oils and medicines. What can be seen from this telegram is that Kim was avid of invading the South, asking for other crucial supplies to start a war. Also, this telegram indicates the Soviet Union's support of North Korea. In another telegram from Moscow to Pyongyang, Stalin approved Kim's proposals and promised to accelerate the delivery of medical supplies and oil. Therefore, Kim had everything needed to start a war: fully prepared armies, military equipment, and support from his ally.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has illuminated the intricate prelude to the Korean War, revealing a complex interplay of ideological ambitions, strategic alliances, and military preparations. The study underscores how the division of the Korean Peninsula into North and South Korea, under different ideological regimes, set the stage for the 1950 conflict. The analysis of telegrams and communications revealed the eager ambition of Kim Il-Sung to unite the peninsula and the strategic calculations behind the Soviet Union's support, which finally led to the conflict. This suggests that the war is not only a local skirmish but a significant episode in the broader background of the Cold War.

However, the research faced limitations due to time constraints and the availability of sources. A more extensive study, which should include a wider range of diplomatic communications and primary sources from multiple perspectives, could have offered a more nuanced understanding of the geological dynamics regarding the origin of the Korean War. In particular, the reliance on specific telegrams may have narrowed the scope of analysis due to the overlooking of other crucial factors and viewpoints.

Future research could focus on a more comprehensive examination of international relations in East Asia during this period, including the roles of China and the United States. Additionally, exploring the domestic political contexts of pre-war North and South Korea could provide deeper insights into internal factors influencing the conflict. This expanded approach would not only enhance our understanding of the Korean War but also contribute to the analysis of ongoing tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

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