

Soviet machinations at root of Korean War

- Source: Global Times
- [21:51 June 16 2010]
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Shen Zihua

Editor's Note:

*June 25 is the 60th anniversary of the start of the Korean War(1950-53). Over the last six decades, concerned countries blamed one another for launching the war. Who planned the war? Why did China enter the war at a time when it needed peace so much? Would the US have adopted a different policy toward China if the war hadn't occurred? Global Times (GT) reporter Li Yanjie interviewed Shen Zihua (Shen), director of the Shanghai-based Center for Cold War International History Studies and a professor of history at East China Normal University. He is the author of *Mao Zedong, Stalin and the Korean War* and many other works on the Korean War. This is the first part of a two-part series.*

GT: There are many different opinions on why the Korean War broke out. What's the truth?

Shen: This is a controversial issue. Although many new archival materials have been disclosed, researchers study and interpret them from different perspectives, and naturally draw different conclusions.

In the past, the Soviets and North Korea blamed the "imperialist" US for launching the war. No one believes it now. South Korea, the US and some other countries, such as the UK and Australia, see the start of the war as North Korea's moves against South Korea.

China doesn't give a clear definition in textbooks, and just indicates that South Korea moved into North Korea

in specific battles and supported the US army.

The study of the Korean War was first based on oral history. Then with more archival materials disclosed, people formed different opinions on the issue. I've been studying the issue over 15 years, and constantly changed my views as more and more materials were disclosed.

For now, there's little controversy over basic historical facts on the outbreak of the war and the initial stages. What people debate hotly on now is the motive. And it's especially hard to find how leaders made decisions in communist countries, as their thoughts may not be totally recorded.

Academically, researchers have two major views. One is that Kim Il-sung launched the war for the reunification of the Korean Peninsula, but the war was affected by outside powers.

The other is that the Cold War and changes in the international order caused the Korean civil war.

Some researchers hold the idea that the Soviet Union tried to raise a revolutionary wave in Asia on the occasion of the founding of the PRC, so Kim launched the war to relieve the Soviet Union's danger in Europe as the Soviets had been defeated in Berlin and had to bend to US power.

But I don't agree with them. I think Stalin didn't launch the war intentionally, but the changes of the Soviet Union's Asian strategy pushed him to make such a decision.

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GT: So who planned the Korean War?

Shen: Before talking about the Korean War, I have to explain why there are two Koreas, North and South.

At the end of World War II, when the US dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, Stalin immediately sent the Soviet army to the Korean Peninsula.

The US didn't want the peninsula to be under the sole control of the Soviet Union, thus it proposed that the two countries should occupy the peninsula together and the 38th parallel would be the border.

Stalin accepted the proposal, but hinted that the same method should be employed in Japan as well, which was refused by the US.

But as the conflicts between the Soviet Union and the US accumulated, especially when the Cold War began in Europe in 1947, the two countries could no longer cooperate on dealing with Korean affairs. So the US required the UN, which was under the influence of the US, to manage the Korean issue. The UN decided to hold an election in the peninsula.

But North Korea refused to participate in the UN-supervised elections held in the south in 1948, which led to the creation of separate Korean governments for the two occupation zones.

Both North and South Korea claimed sovereignty over the peninsula as a whole, and both wanted to take the other by force.

After the election, the Soviet Union and the US withdrew their forces from the peninsula. Then small-scale conflicts between the North and South Korea began to occur.

Kim Il-sung kept asking for Stalin and Mao Zedong's approval to use force to take South Korea.

But at first both demurred Kim's plan, as the Soviet Union didn't want to aggravate tensions with the US, and China was concentrating on its own reunification. We can find evidence for this in the disclosed archive materials from former Soviet Union and China.

But in late January 1950, Stalin suddenly changed his mind and agreed to Kim's plan to undertake military operations against South Korea.

He also called Kim to Moscow for secret talks. In the April talks, Stalin gave final approval to Kim's plan to start the war.

Stalin agreed to Kim's estimate that the US would decline to or not have enough time to intervene in the war.

But during the talks, Stalin repeatedly emphasized that Mao's opinion on the plan must be solicited and the war could not be carried out without the CPC's agreement because Mao had a very deep understanding of issues in the East, and in case of US intervention, the Soviet Union would not come forward to assist North Korea,

so Kim could only turn to China for assistance.

On May 13, 1950, Kim went to Beijing to solicit Mao's opinion. Mao was suspicious of the claim that Moscow had already approved North Korea's plan, so he requested the Soviet ambassador Nikolai Roshchin to confirm it with Stalin.

Stalin answered that he had approved Kim's plan, but if China did not agree, they should discuss the issue again and the final decision should be made by the [Chinese](#) and North Koreans themselves.

Thus Mao had no choice but to agree to the common position of Moscow and Pyongyang, and said that if the US entered the war, China would send its own armies to assist North Korea, and armies could be transferred to the China-Korea border right away.

Based on the above materials, the launching of the Korean War was originally Moscow's and Pyongyang's idea, but Stalin managed to foist responsibility on Mao.

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GT: Why did Stalin first deny, then approve Kim Il-sung's plan?

Shen: Because the Sino-Soviet relations were going through some changes at that time, and Stalin adopted the Soviet Union's strategy in the Far East for his own national interests.

Soon after the founding of the People's Republic of China, Mao visited Moscow in December 1949 to celebrate Stalin's birthday. But Mao's major task was to enhance the bilateral relations by signing a treaty of alliance.

At that time China and the Soviet Union had to discuss two problems. One was whether to maintain the Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1945, signed by the Soviets and Chiang Kai-shek government, or to sign a new one, and the other was how to deal with the problems surrounding China's Changchun railway, Dalian harbor and Lüshun port, and the independence of Mongolia.

According to the Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1945, the Changchun railway was owned by the Soviet Union and managed by both, and the Soviet Union had a 30-year lease over Dalian harbor and Lüshun port and the right to station troops in Lüshun port for 30 years. These articles hurt China's interests. The 1945 treaty also forced China to recognize Mongolia's independence.

But the news that the UK, India and some other countries might recognize the People's Republic of China, and US signals that it might negotiate with the PRC forced Stalin to change his attitude.

Finally Stalin agreed to sign a new treaty and to return the Changchun railway, Dalian harbor and Lüshun port to China within a few years.

However, this means the Soviet Union lost its strategic strongholds in the Far East and its ice-free ports to the Pacific Ocean.

So Stalin began to reconsider Kim's plan for taking South Korea by force, as there are three excellent ice-free ports there to the Pacific Ocean. If a pro-Soviet government could control the whole Korean Peninsula, the Soviet Union's strategic interests in the Far East could be secured.

Stalin telegraphed Kim and asked him to go to Moscow to discuss his plan. Kim convinced Stalin that the US wouldn't intervene, or at least would not be able to, so Stalin approved Kim's plan. So Kim launched the war on June 25, 1950.

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GT: Why did Stalin and Kim believe that the US wouldn't intervene, and why did the US in fact so rapidly enter the war?

Shen: When Mao was discussing the Sino-Soviet Treaty in Moscow, the US, aiming to prevent China and the Soviet Union from forming an alliance, announced that it would not intervene in China's domestic affairs, including the Taiwan question. US Secretary of State Dean Acheson had openly stated that the Korean Peninsula was not in the US range of defense.

But actually at that time the US just took a wait-and-see attitude, waiting for the changes in Sino-Soviet relations, so that it could adopt a suitable policy to protect US interests in the Far East and the Pacific Ocean.

When China and the Soviet Union signed the new treaty and the alliance was formed, the US adopted a strategy of containment, blocking the spread of communism in both Asia and Europe.

The Korean War provided a chance for the US to practice this strategy. So the US intervened only two days after the outbreak of the war, sending troops to Korea and the 7th Fleet to protect Taiwan.

Some say that if China hadn't signed the treaty with the Soviet Union, the US might have adopted a different policy to China and China might have been able to reclaim Taiwan.

But I think what the US did was aimed at sowing dissension between China and the Soviet Union. Its policy for containing communism wouldn't change.