



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXIII / 2022

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## **Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises**

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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**viella**

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CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

# ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989  
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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### NARRATIVES OF THE ORIGINS OF THE KOREAN WAR: A REVIEW OF SEVEN DECADES

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*The Armistice that the belligerent forces negotiated to end the Korean War was finalized on 27 July 1953, over seven decades ago. However, there has been no serious discussion since then among the signees – the United States (which signed on behalf of the UN Command), the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and China (The Republic of Korea refused to sign the cease-fire agreement) – to formally conclude this war with a peace treaty. Over this time, however, researchers of this war have engaged in debates over its origins that far surpassed those related to other wars both in time spent and pages published. These debates have centred on issues such as the nature of this war (whether it was civil or international, or a combination of both) and the instigator of the belligerence (the Korea that first crossed the thirty-eighth parallel to start the war). The discussions have been driven by early Cold War interpretations of the Soviet Union and United States interests in the Northeast Asian region, interpretations that others later challenged as limited. The immediate post-Cold War period momentarily opened previously closed archives in China and the Soviet Union making available a large cache of documents that further clarified these issues. These documents included important correspondence exchanged between the three communist capitals – Moscow, Beijing, and P'yŏngyang – in the months prior to and after the fighting began. This initiated yet another round of discussions on the war's origins. This review aims to critically evaluate the historiography focussed on the attempt to uncover the true origins of the Korean War. By focusing on the strengths and limitations of the historiographical contributions dealing with the origins of the war, this review article hopes to add to our general knowledge of the war, and, in doing so, to that of the Cold War period, as the Korean war was the first major military confrontation of that period.*

KEYWORDS – Korean War; Soviet Union; United States; ROK; DPRK; Japan; textbooks; telegrams; origins; 25 June 1950; post-war; Ongjin Peninsula

## 1. *Introduction*

Visitors to the Korean War Memorial in Seoul, Republic of Korea (ROK), are greeted at the entrance by the Clock Tower, a statue designed to hold three clocks: one clock with the present time, a second one reserved for the time when the two Koreas reunite, and a third clock frozen at 4 A.M. on the morning of 25 June 1950, the exact moment when according to the ROK historiography the Korean War, or the «625 War» (*Yugio tongnam*), began with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) forces suddenly streaming across the thirty-eighth parallel to initiate the war. The DPRK has long accepted the late June 1950 starting date of the war but insists that its belligerent action was a «counterattack» as it was the ROK who initiated the fighting by first crossing to the north. These historical narratives have endured a number of challenges to their validity over the seven decades since the start of the war. Indeed, the roots of this «forgotten war», as it has come to be known, are arguably debated to a far greater extent than other wars of the recent past<sup>1</sup>. This review aims to trace the major contributions of this debate over the Korean War's origins<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. «Textbook» arguments

The narrative that has stood the test of time in the official history of the ROK, primarily in school textbooks, monuments, and museum displays, centres on three components: The Soviet Union planned and directed the attack; the DPRK carried it out; and they did so suddenly without warning. In the United States and elsewhere this narrative understands the Soviet's ambition as using the DPRK attack as a first step toward a larger plan to spread communism throughout the region. This justified U.S. participation in a war that others argue to have been a civil conflict. In other words, the U.S. participation was equated with its military intervention in the Second World War, its purpose being to save the «free democratic» world from evil ideology – fascism then, and communism now. U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson emphasized the probable Soviet role in his memoirs on the war:

It seemed close to certain that the attack had been mounted, supplied, and instigated by the Soviet Union and that it would not be stopped

1. Ironically, the first usage of «forgotten war» as a moniker for the war apparently appeared in 1951, while the war was still very much in progress, in an article that appeared in the U.S. weekly news magazine *U.S. News and World Report*. This article questioned why, despite the high number of American casualties in Korea, the war had been replaced in the news by stories on beef shortages, government graft, and labour strikes. [*U.S. News and World Report* 1951, October 5, p. 21].

2. Wada Haruki offers a comprehensive introduction to Korean War historiography [Wada 2014, pp. xviii-xxvii].



by anything short of force. If Korean force proved unequal to the job, as seemed probable, only American military intervention could do it. [...] Plainly, this attack did not amount to a *casus belli* against the Soviet Union. Equally plainly it was an open, undisguised challenge to our internationally accepted position as the protector of South Korea, an area of great importance to the security of American-occupied Japan. To back away from this challenge, in view of our capacity for meeting it, would be highly destructive of the power and prestige of the United States [Acheson 1969, p. 20].

Soon after receiving the news of the attack, Acheson contacted President Harry S. Truman before arranging an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council. This met the next day to demand that the DPRK «cease hostilities and ...withdraw their armed forces to the thirty-eighth parallel» [Ibid., pp. 18-19]. A UN command was formed one week later on 7 July to assist the ROK<sup>3</sup>.

Japan, still under occupation control by the United States and prohibited by its Pacific War surrender terms, and limited by its 1947 constitution from engaging in military aggression, could not officially join the UN Command. Its participation in the war, however, was immeasurable; in his memoirs, the then U.S. Ambassador to Japan, Robert D. Murphy, described Japan's role as having been «indispensable» to the forces who confronted the communist challenge [Nishimura 2004, p. 151]. Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, who also interpreted the DPRK attack in international terms, took measures in the days following the attack to ensure that the UN Command would receive Japan's full cooperation. This, in Yoshida's view, was necessary to protect Japan's self-defence: The attack was, he argued, more than simply a Soviet effort to liberate the ROK and would threaten Japan next should it succeed in Korea<sup>4</sup>. Japan's recently promulgated post-war constitution, drafted primarily by the United States, prohibited in Article 9 the country from «maintaining [any kind of] land, sea, and air forces, as well

3. In addition to the United States and ROK forces, the UN Command included military personnel from Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, Thailand, Ethiopia, Turkey, the Philippines, New Zealand, Greece, France, Columbia, Belgium, South Africa, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. Additionally, Denmark, India, Italy, Norway, and Sweden contributed with humanitarian assistance. The Security Council was able to organize this command as the Soviet Union was at the time boycotting the sessions over the Council's refusal to replace the Nationalist China representative with one from Communist China after the latter's victory in China's civil war had driven the Nationalists to Taiwan, and thus could not exercise its veto privilege. During the Korean War and its aftermath, the Commander of the UN Command, and until recently the Deputy Commander, had always been a U.S. military official.

4. Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru announced that Japan, while remaining neutral, would lend any cooperation necessary to the United Nations forces, which he expected would come to Japan's assistance should the communist invasion spill over to Japan [AS 1950a] and vowed on 14 July 1950 in a speech before the Japanese National Assembly to assist in the fight against the invading communists [AS 1950b].

as other war potential». The Japanese, however, interpreted this Article as not inhibiting its ability to act in its self-defence<sup>5</sup>.

The ROK government described the attack orchestrated by the DPRK military as sudden and unexpected, one that also caught the U.S. by complete surprise. The DPRK armies enjoyed early success. Within a matter of days, they had occupied the ROK capital, Seoul, and driven the ROK military and government back to the Pusan perimeter in the southern-most region of the country, where the ROK relocated its capital and where a large number of its citizens took refuge. It took a daring September landing by U.S. General Douglas MacArthur at In'chŏn to drive out the DPRK forces. Within two months, the UN Command forces had retaken Seoul, crossed the thirty-eighth parallel into the DPRK, and advanced to the Yalu River, the enemy's northernmost border with China and the Soviet Union. One photograph shows U.S. forces enjoying Thanksgiving dinner in late November on the river banks<sup>6</sup>. Chinese armies, who in October 1950 had stealthily crossed into northern Korea, eventually drove the UN Command out of the DPRK territory and back to below the thirty-eighth parallel.

The DPRK, which refers to the war as the «Fatherland Liberation War» (*Choguk haebang chŏnjaeng*), scripted a version of the war's origin that mirrors that of the ROK in one respect, but revises it in another. Fighting did break out between the two Koreas from 25 June, but it was the ROK, rather than the DPRK, that attacked first. Korean War historian Bruce Cumings notes that the DPRK had long insisted that its 25 June attack was an effort to repel an ROK invasion that had taken place two days earlier [Cumings 1990, p. 569]. A 1996 Japanese translation of the DPRK history of Korea maintains that it acted in self-defence. The war began, it argues, after ROK President Syngman Rhee rejected overtures by the DPRK to peacefully unify the peninsula. Rhee then teamed with the imperialist U.S. to send hundreds of thousand soldiers north at different points along the thirty-eighth parallel on 25 June. The ROK then widened the battles while ignoring DPRK warnings to halt the fighting. In an emergency cabinet meeting that Kim Il Sung convened on the day of the attack, the DPRK leader announced that «American imperialists have abandoned the Korean people. The wolf has to answer with a club (*ōkami ha konbō ashiraubekida*). We have to show those who belittle and challenge the Korean people their grit». Kim continued by demanding that his armies launch a counterattack to «sweep [the invaders] away» (*sōtō*)<sup>7</sup> [CSTS 3 1996, p. 80].

The Soviet Union/Russian version of the war has varied in accordance with the revolutionary and diplomatic changes that the country has experi-

5. See Samuels [2997, pp. 30-32] for an early history of Japanese interpretations of Article 9 of its post-war constitution.

6. See photograph in Bruce Cumings [2010, p. 28].

7. Kwang-Soo Kim argues that the DPRK inserted the word «counterattack» into its initial plan of attack to hide its role in starting the war [Kim 2001, p. 19].

enced over the decades since the war. It has, however, remained committed to the idea that the war's beginning was «sudden». While during the Cold War the Soviet Union supported the DPRK version of the war's origins, it shifted its views from the 1990s, when it opened its archives on the war. An article on the Korean War published by the Ministry of Defence in «*Voennoe obozrenie*» (Military Review) addresses the war's origins in passive form: «the war broke out», without blaming either side for the initial attack [Samsonov 2012, online]. Soviet noncommittal on this issue reflects its stance that both sides wanted to unify the peninsula on their own terms.<sup>8</sup>

Chinese history textbooks offer a slightly different angle to the war. Like some Russian accounts, the narrative it tells avoids the question of initial attack – the Korean civil war broke out (*Chōsen no naisen ga bohatsu* – and continued with the UN Command, led by the U.S., entering the conflict. These enemy forces threatened China, it contends, by intervening in its politics, and by crossing the thirty-eighth parallel to advance across the Chinese border. The textbook provided evidence of this intrusion by including a picture of a Chinese village that had sustained damage by U.S. aerial bombing. It further explained that the «oppressive imperialist Americans» did not even imagine that the Chinese would enter the war. MacArthur's predictions that the war would end soon, before Christmas, were frustrated by the Chinese Volunteer Army crossing the Yalu River to fight in Korea, thus prolonging the battles. It was a foreign enemy threat to its national sovereignty that drew China into the war<sup>9</sup>.

There were no third-party forces at the thirty-eighth parallel at the time the two Korea's engaged in the battles that would ignite the Korean War. Thus, the only first-hand accounts available are those left by the ROK and the DPRK. Among the immediate reactions by the relatively small number of U.S. military advisors who remained on the peninsula after the majority of forces had retreated from Korea, after the ROK state had been formed, were those that initially assumed that it had been the ROK who had initiated the war. Previous to its outbreak, President Rhee had threatened to attack north on numerous occasions; the ROK had been responsible for initiating many of the battles that broke out along the thirty-eighth parallel in the summer of 1949. Yet, accounts written soon after the 25 June 1950 attack attribute responsibility to one Korea or the other, depending on the

8. Professor Sergei Kurbanov, one of the more respected Korean scholars in Russia, accents this view by using in his monograph on Korean history the rather neutral term, Korean War, rather than the DPRK's use of the «War of Liberation», or the ROK's «25 June War» [Kurbanov 2009, p. 422] regarding the war. I am grateful to Nagoya University Professor Igor Saveliev for making me aware of and translating the information on the Russian narratives of the Korean War origins.

9. The Chinese history textbooks were translated into Japanese as part of a «*Seikai no kyōkasho shiri-zu*» (Global Textbook Series) of junior and high school textbooks from various countries published by Akaiishi Shoten.

side of the parallel the narrative belongs to as well as on which international partner assisted in their war efforts. Soon, alternative views would question these «textbook» narratives of the war's origins.

### 3. *Challenges to the «textbook» narrative*

That war might erupt across the peninsula had been anticipated almost as soon as the guns of the Pacific War fell silent. At around this time rumours circulated in the area that World War III was imminent, this time with the Japanese fighting alongside the U.S. against the Soviet Union<sup>10</sup>. Concerns that the Soviets were preparing a Korean military unit that would enter Korea as soon as Japan surrendered had surfaced in U.S. official circles even before the Pacific War had ended. Such fears intensified soon after the two occupations had commenced their operations in Korea to predict that the Soviets, attracted by their historic desire for an ice-free port in East Asia, coveted control over the entire peninsula. The first «Conditions of Korea» report that the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) issued after its arrival on 8 September 1945 warned that the peninsula was a «powder keg ready to explode upon application of a spark» [United States Department of State 1969, p. 1049]. Similar statements frequently appeared throughout the five years that preceded the Korean War.

The first formal challenge to «textbook» narratives on the Korean War's origins appeared while the war was in progress, in 1952. At this time the journalist, I. F. Stone, published his *The Hidden History of the Korean War* [Stone 1952]. This, challenging the claim that the invasion had been a surprise, argued that there was sufficient evidence to conclude that the U.S. could not have been caught off guard. For example, he informed that the U.S. Admiral Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter had admitted as much at a press conference held soon after the fighting had begun. On this occasion he said that U.S. intelligence had felt that «conditions existed in Korea that could have meant an invasion this week or next» [Ibid., p. 2]. Stone then traced how both sides had been preparing for military confrontation months prior to June 1950. Indeed, it would have taken the DPRK months to assemble a force large enough to launch the invasion that the ROK and the U.S. accused them of making. How could the ROK and the U.S. have not noticed this? Reports drafted over this period, Stone argues, suggested that they had.

Stone also cited a number of occasions when the ROK government, as well, demonstrated knowledge of the DPRK's impending attack [Ibid., p. 13]. Over the months prior to June 1950, ROK officials had been beg-

10. A number of these rumours spread through letters passed between Koreans and Japanese to acquaintances in Korea and Japan. Excerpts of these letters, intercepted and read by U.S. occupation officials, can be found in the seven-volume set of G-2 Periodic Report [Asia Munhwa Yon'guso 1988].

ging the U.S. for weapons to counter a possible invasion. Fears that Rhee would use the weapons to launch an attack north prevented the U.S. from obliging him. The U.S. had, however, provided the ROK with assurances of assistance, should it become necessary. This assurance was something that President Rhee had long sought and received from MacArthur during the Korean president's visits to Tokyo in early October 1948, and most probably in February 1950, as well as on other occasions. The following March, Rhee vowed at a March First Movement commemorative rally that he would «recover North Korea» [Chungan ilbo 1950, March 1, p. 238]. Just days before the start of the war, on 19 June, John Foster Dulles, then advisor to the U.S. Secretary of State, had declared before the Korean National Assembly that Korea «was not alone» in its struggles against communism [Ibid., p. 17]<sup>11</sup>.

Stone notes that from Seoul Dulles flew to Tokyo where, upon landing, he told reporters that he expected something «positive» from his scheduled talks with MacArthur. He predicted that «positive action» would be taken to preserve the peace of the Far East. Stone suggests that the «positive action» to which Dulles referred could have meant the U.S. sending warning to the communist bloc against committing any belligerent acts. However, given that the war broke out soon after Dulles' statement, according to Stone the «action» that Dulles had in mind was something more concrete, such as a large-scale U.S. intervention against communism in the region [Ibid., p. 27]. Stone concludes that, like the Spanish-American War of 1898, mysteries remain as to who started the belligerence, as well as whether the United States had been drawn into it [Ibid., p. 345]<sup>12</sup>.

Two decades later, Jon Halliday, writing in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, drew attention to Stone's work. While acknowledging the importance of his efforts, Halliday considered Stone to have been «rather apolitical», and, thus, his work required a «rigorous reexamination». In particular Halliday objected to Stone's use of the word «satellite» to describe the DPRK relationship with the Soviet Union, as well as the rather favourable treatment that he had given President Truman at the time, a man the journalist had described as one who would not do deliberate harm, a man who was a «victim of both the circumstances and forces stronger than himself». Halliday argued the need for a «Marxist history of the Korean War», one that would tell the story more from the Korean people's perspective, one that would see the war's beginning with the arrival of the American military in 1945 as well as the DPRK's attempt to liberate the people of the south [Halliday 1973, p. 36]. Halliday does point out a contradiction in the DPRK's claim that it had responded to an initial ROK attack but then em-

11. During his visit to the ROK, Dulles visited the thirty-eighth parallel just days before the three-year war erupted. For a picture of Dulles peering into the DPRK see Cumings [2010, p. 7].

12. Stone quoted newly appointed Ambassador to Moscow, George F. Kennan, as making this analogy at the University of Chicago in 1951.

phasizes that it fought to liberate the south. He then also details the support that southern communists had given once the peninsula became engulfed in war, as former southern communist leader, Pak Hon-yong, gave to Kim Il Sung prior to the war [Ibid., p. 39]. Halliday in 1988 then teamed with Bruce Cumings, who at the time was completing his own history on the war, to produce a six-part documentary on the war titled *Korea: The Unknown War* [Halliday and Cumings 1988]. The content was then published in a book [Halliday and Cumings 1990].

Soon after, Bruce Cumings published the second of his two-volume history titled the *Origins of the Korean War* that further challenged the text-book origins of the war. The depth and breathe of his study continue to influence scholars of this war, even to those who disagree with his arguments<sup>13</sup>. To properly understand the war, Cumings argued, scholars had to understand the indigenous origins of the war rather than seeing it as a part of a more global cause. He did so by tracing indigenous activities in Korea over the five years leading up to all-out war in 1950, that is, from at least the point of Korea's liberation, if not earlier [Cumings 1981, p. xx]. He explains:

The basic issues over which the war in 1950 was fought were apparent immediately after liberation, within a three-month period, and led to open fighting that eventually claimed more than one hundred thousand lives in peasant rebellion, labor strife, guerrilla warfare, and open fighting along the thirty-eighth parallel—all this before the ostensible Korean War began. In other words, the conflict was civil and revolutionary in character, beginning just after 1945 and proceeding through a dialectic of revolution and reaction. The opening of conventional battles in June 1950 only continued this war by other means [Ibid., p. xxi].

Cumings devotes a full chapter in his second volume to Dean Acheson's January 1950 Press Club speech. Here, Cumings suggests, the Secretary of State purposely excluded the U.S. responsibility to defend Korea in an effort to lure the DPRK into attacking south. The speech outlined the area to which the U.S. was committed to defending in East Asia by drawing a defence perimeter that extended from the Aleutian Islands off of Alaska to the Philippine Islands and passing through Japan. His leaving out the Korean Peninsula, Cumings argues, gave the DPRK a «green light» to advance south of the thirty-eighth parallel. Acheson did not entirely erase Korea from U.S. interests but stated that, should the ROK be attacked, «the initial reliance must be on the people attacked to resist it» [Cumings 1990, p. 421-22]<sup>14</sup>. Cumings reconstructs peasant rebellions that broke out in southern

13. Cumings published his two volumes in 1981 and 1990.

14. Acheson does not mention this speech in his account of the war cited above, the narrative for which he starts from the weekend of 24-25 June.

Korea from 1945, which were followed by guerrilla warfare<sup>15</sup>, and many of which drew on labour issues between peasants and the landed classes, as well as between those who espoused extreme leftist versus extreme rightist thinking. These battles then expanded into border insurrections between the ROK and the DPRK that began soon after the two Koreas formed sovereign states in August (ROK) and in September (DPRK) 1948. Many of these advances, which Cumings argues provided the «setting for June 1950», resulted from ROK's initiatives. One particular attack in mid-July worried U.S. authorities that it might trigger an all-out war. Cumings concluded that this July attack and other such incidents did not result in war because the DPRK was not yet ready to engage the ROK in such an extended confrontation at the time; by June 1950, however, it was [Ibid., p. 388-98].

The Japanese have been relatively quiet in researching such questions; their histories generally reflect the idea that the attack came suddenly from the north. With an interest in separating the war from their colonial history of Korea and having more immediate concerns following their devastating defeat in the Pacific War, perhaps this is not entirely surprising. One important exception, however is research conducted by University of Tokyo professor Wada Haruki whose efforts took him to examine the Soviet connections to the war. Originally trained in Russian studies, his interests gravitated toward post-war Soviet-DPRK relations. Some of Wada's conclusions regarding the Korean War concur with those of Cumings; others do not. Where Cumings emphasizes the indigenous elements in the war's origins, Wada focuses on the regional elements in terming the conflict the «Northeast Asian War». Like Cumings, his research briefly touches on the pre-June 1950 fighting in which the two Koreas engaged, such as the 1949 border insurrections [Wada 2014, pp. 21-25], and traces DPRK initiatives for war, rather than citing the war as a Soviet Union initiative. Using DPRK documents captured by the United States during the war he traces the northern plan to attack ROK forces along the thirty-eighth parallel from 4:40 A.M. on 25 June. He carries the translation of a lengthy telegram sent on 26 June by the Soviet Ambassador to the DPRK, Terentii Shtykov, to the First Deputy Chief of the Soviet General Staff Matvei Vasil'evich Zakharov in Moscow. The telegram outlined the DPRK «preparation and progress» over the days leading up to the attack [Ibid., pp. 76-77].

Wada sees this telegram as the «smoking gun» that demonstrates the DPRK culpability for the fighting that broke out on 25 June, even though he cites Kim Il Sung as describing the attack the following day as a «counterattack» against the «puppet forces of the traitor Syngman Rhee» [Ibid., p. 78]. While Wada's study expands the war's narrative to a wider degree than the limited discussion of the «textbook» narratives, his focus is mostly directed

15. John Merrill's research examines one of the larger battles that took place on Cheju Island from early 1948 to trace its connections with the June 1950 war [Merrill 1989].

toward the war itself, rather than to discussions on the events that led to the 25 June start of conventional war.

Another challenge to Cumings work is that by William Stueck who focuses on the international side of the war. Like Cumings and Wada, he briefly traces the war from Korea's post-liberation history, but cites the DPRK as the force that triggered the war. The attack, he argues should not have come as a surprise to the ROK or United States forces; there had been plenty of warnings of this possibility beforehand [Stueck 1995, p. 10]. Stueck acknowledges that the war may have started out as a civil conflict, but within a week it turned international. Thus, it is this aspect of the war that requires our attention. He explains:

What had begun as a conflict between Koreans aimed at eradicating the division of their country soon became a struggle of broad international proportions, one that threatened to escalate into a direct confrontation between the West and the Soviet bloc [Ibid., p. 13].

Stueck questions whether the war could have been fought without international participation. In this sense the difference between Cumings and Stueck is the former placing more emphasis on the indigenous elements of the war, and the latter on the international elements. It is not that Cumings ignores the role of the two Koreas' international partners, but he claims that without the local Korean elements the possibilities of a Korean War outbreak were nil – basically the opposite of what Stueck argues.

Most recently, British author A. B. Abrams has advanced the idea that the U.S. had more to gain than either the Soviet Union and China in war erupting on the Korean Peninsula and thus the possibility of a war being initiated by the ROK was greater than that by the DPRK. He argues as follows:

While the outbreak of war in Korea was key to ensuring the survival of the Rhee government in the south, and had considerable strategic and economic benefits for the United States, the conflict created immense difficulties for both Moscow and Beijing [Abrams 2020, p. 53].

Abrams' study, which offers a unique perspective on the war, fails to consider evidence made available with the brief opening of Russian and Chinese archives from the 1990s, as well as the secondary research that has emerged since.

#### *4. Documents from the Soviet and Chinese archives*

A third major wave of rethinking the Korean War was initiated by the release of telegraphs and other documents from the Soviet and Chinese archives from the early 1990s, just around the time the Cold War drew to a close. Prior to this time, memoirs left by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrush-



chev published in 1970 as *Khrushchev Remembers* served as the most important source for understanding Soviet, Chinese, and DPRK connections prior to the war. Russian President Boris Yeltsin initiated these efforts to unseal relevant documents when he brought to Seoul while on a state visit in 1994 a box of telegrams that had been exchanged between Moscow, Beijing, and P'yŏngyang in the days before and after 25 June<sup>16</sup>. since this time a large number of telegrams and official documents have also been released. Kathryn Weathersby, who assumed a lion's share of the Russian to English translations of the telegram collection, explains that since that time «documentary evidence on the Korean War has been enriched even more by the release of virtually the entire collection of high-level documents on the war declassified by the Presidential Archive in Moscow, which numbers approximately 1,200 pages» [Weathersby 1995/1996, p. 30]. This new evidence has been exploited by scholars who have written on Korean and Chinese issues, as well as on Eastern European countries, and whose research has been collected into a series of «working papers» published by the Cold War International History Project, organized by the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C.

Professor Chen Jian, from Cornell University, is one of these scholars. His research completely revised our knowledge of China's decision to enter the Korean War. Prior to this time, Allen S. Whiting's 1960 study titled *China Crosses the Yalu* had been the most authoritative work on this critical angle of the war. Whiting noted that certain factors, such as China's more important interest in absorbing Taiwan and a shortage of resources due to its having had to fight two wars, first against the Japanese and then against the Nationalist Chinese, made fighting another war difficult. Whiting lamented that the absence of documentation needed to determine why the Chinese communists had crossed the Yalu River to fight in Korea limited him to raising hypotheses rather than arriving at conclusive answers to this question. He posed that a strong possible reason for the Chinese decision to intervene was perhaps linked to their dependence on the Soviet Union's assistance should the U.S. continue its ambitions to rollback communism from the Chinese mainland. In this case, their participation in the war was secondary to their relations with their Korean communist ally [Whiting 1960, pp. 152-53]. Another possible concern was that if anti-DPRK forces succeeded in unifying the Korean Peninsula it would have placed U.S. and ROK forces at the Chinese border, something unacceptable to Beijing. According to Whiting, though, Mao's government did not participate in the war's planning and may not have known of the DPRK's plans beforehand. China's concerns at the time were more directed toward Taiwan and Tibet, rather than the Korean Peninsula [Ibid., p. 45].

16. In the early 1990s the Soviet Union and China both established relations with the ROK, to the dismay of the DPRK who felt betrayed by its long-time communist allies.

In 1994, Chen collected his findings into a monograph titled *China's Road to the Korean War*, where he concluded that China was more involved in the war's planning than previously imagined. Chen contends that not only did China know of the DPRK's plans, but also that Mao had approved of them, perhaps reluctantly, in advance. Stalin had directed Kim to seek Mao's approval for the attack and his willingness to come to its assistance if necessary as a prerequisite of the DPRK leader gaining Soviet assistance. Kim visited Mao in Beijing in May 1950 when the Chinese leader promised Kim the support he needed to get Stalin's approval and assistance. Unbeknown to Kim at this time, Stalin had most likely been holding discussions with Mao on the Korean issue and on the concrete possibility of war. One question of controversy appears to have been the two leaders' thoughts on whether the U.S. would intervene. Reports on whether Mao feared this or not are mixed, but by January 1950, and particularly after the aforementioned Acheson Press Club speech, he had become convinced that the U.S. would not interfere should the two Koreas go to war against each other. Chen suggests that, at the time, the Soviets and the Chinese had been developing close relations and thus had become dependent on each other in their struggles with the U.S. [Chen 1994, pp. 85-91]. The two leaders continued to communicate up through, and after, the start of the war.

Another angle to understand the Chinese participation in the war is its connection to the Stalin-Mao relationship. The Chinese Communist victory in October 1949 suddenly challenged Stalin's monopoly on control over the Asian communist movement. Kim Il Sung suggested as much in December 1949 when he threatened to turn to the Chinese for help if the Soviets refused to assist him [Torcov 2001, p. 89]. Could this have influenced Stalin's positive response to Kim at this time? According to Chen Jian, it was only after Mao's visit to Moscow in December 1949<sup>17</sup>, and only after the two communist giants signed a treaty of alliance and friendship, that Stalin agreed to talk with Kim regarding a possible invasion of the ROK. Their new partnership, the Chinese leader felt, could serve as a deterrent to a possible U.S. aggression [Chen 1994, p. 90-91]. Chen further claims that the exchanges between Beijing and Moscow occurred at a time when the roots of their divergences perhaps began to sprout. He writes:

In addition to the usual troubles between any partners (such as the differences in each other's strategic emphasis, and the gap between one's

17. This was Mao's first overseas trip since the Chinese communist victory in October of that year. He stayed in Moscow until February 1950. Just prior to his visit Mao announced his lean-to-one-side policy where he pledged that China would side with Soviet foreign policy, rather than seek alliance with the United States [Shen and Xia 2015, pp. 33-35]. Although the two communist leaders signed a Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, the Soviet leader's reception of his Chinese counterpart was less than cordial. The Western press even speculated that Mao was being kept under «house arrest» in Moscow. Shen and Xia offer a detailed survey of Mao's visit [Ibid., pp. 48-56].

need for support and the other's ability to offer aid), an important source of differences between Beijing and Moscow lay in the conflicting personalities of Mao and Stalin. The reality created by the [Chinese] lean-to-one-side policy became particularly uneasy for Mao when he had to play the role as Stalin's junior in direct exchanges with the Soviets, especially in face-to-face discussions with Stalin himself. One finds here the early clues of the divergence between Beijing and Moscow during the Korean crisis and, in the long-run, of the process leading to a Sino-Soviet split [Ibid., p. 91].

In addition to new revelations on China's participation in the war, these documents have also afforded a clearer picture of Soviet concerns as well. Kathryn Weathersby has written a number of papers that draw on the telegrams as well as on the documents that she found in the Russian archives and that together have enriched our understanding of the Soviet position regarding the war at this time. At the same time, they expose holes in the «textbook» narratives of the war that the U.S. advanced, and Japan adopted.

While the documents strengthen arguments that the DPRK attacked first, they also show quite persuasively that it was Kim Il Sung who made initial attempts to convince a reluctant Stalin to support his ambitions to attack the ROK. Kim first attempted this in March 1949, just around the time when the U.S. and the Soviet militaries were scheduled to retreat from the Korean Peninsula. At that time Stalin, through his ambassador to the DPRK, Terentii Shtykov, responded by saying that the timing was not yet right: the ROK military remained superior; Kim should wait for the ROK to make the first move [Weathersby 1995, pp. 1, 2-9].

As mentioned above, Kim tried a second time in December 1949. By this time the situation had changed dramatically. The Soviet Union had joined the U.S. as a nuclear power in September, and the Chinese civil war had ended with the communist victory in October. The three leaders felt that these developments would lessen the chances of the U.S. entering a war in the region. Stalin gave Kim a positive response to his request in January 1950 and in late February he dispatched Lieutenant-General Vasiliev to take over the responsibility of main advisor of the DPRK army [Ibid., p. 17]. Kim travelled to Moscow to meet Stalin in late March of that year. However, only summaries, rather than a complete transcript, of the meeting have survived. Stalin confirmed to Kim that changes in the international environment had worked in their favour, specifically the Chinese Communist victory and the recently forged Sino-Soviet Treaty. Still, he raised two problematic issues: The possibility of the U.S. joining the war and the Chinese supporting the DPRK's efforts. Kim responded first in the negative – the U.S. would not join if it knew that the DPRK had Soviet and Chinese support, and then in the positive – Comrade Mao had long supported the DPRK's desire to unify the peninsula.

Stalin then turned to two prerequisites for DPRK's success: sufficient preparation and planning. Kim could count on Soviet support in these two areas but Moscow would not directly dispatch its armies to the battlefield. Stalin further cautioned Kim that Soviet support would be curtailed if the United States came to the ROK's rescue. Kim, however, assured the Soviet leader that this would not be possible as the war would not last long. Long-time southern communist leader, Pak Hon-yong, who had fled to north after being harassed by USAMGIK, accompanied Kim to Moscow, and later to Beijing. He had assured Kim that 200,000 southern guerrilla forces were ready to join the northern communists once the war started. Kim passed this information on to Stalin. Stalin urged Kim to discuss this operation with Mao to obtain his support. The report of this meeting ended with the two sides agreeing that concrete plans for the invasion would be finalized by the following summer [Weathersby 2002, pp. 9-11].

Stalin's thinking was that the operation would be an Asian affair, with the Chinese assisting the DPRK and the Japanese possibly assisting the ROK. The Soviets and the U.S. would assist the two Koreas from behind by providing them with military hardware and advice, but they would remain in the background rather than directly joining in the battles and risking provoking a larger world war. Even though the Soviet Union in 1949 had succeeded in becoming the second nuclear power it still remained an inferior one in terms of device numbers<sup>18</sup>.

In May 1950, Kim and Pak travelled to Beijing to meet with Mao Zedong as Stalin had directed. The Chinese leader raised the possibility that the Japanese would join the war: Would such a development affect the DPRK's plans in any way? Kim responded that it would: The Japanese coming to the ROK's assistance would motivate his armies to fight harder. Mao also voiced concern over the possibility of the U.S. entering the war, to which Kim responded that «the Americans do not show any inclination to engage themselves militarily in the Far East», as seen in their reluctance to enter the China civil war [Ibid., p. 12]. Mao emphasized to the DPRK leaders that the Chinese would come to their assistance only if necessary, that is, if the U.S. joined the battles. Later, after the U.S. had entered the war, Kim initially declined Mao's offer to send Chinese troops [Wada 2014, p. 61], at least until the U.S. advanced into DPRK territory in late September 1950. Mao's commitment was perhaps driven by the debt that he felt toward the DPRK who had sent forces to fight for China in its recent battles against Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces [Ibid.]. Overall, from these discussions between Kim, Stalin, and Mao emerges the three communist leaders' serious misreading of the United States' intentions regarding war breaking out in Korea.

18. A report penned by Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen has the U.S. in 1950 having as many as 299 nuclear weapons to the Soviet Union's 5 [Norris and Kristensen 2010, p. 81].

The original plan that Kim presented to Stalin did not necessarily involve the DPRK seeking to control the entire Korean Peninsula, but simply fighting to secure a modest adjustment in the ROK-DPRK line of division. This was important because the initial territory that the DPRK hoped to acquire, the Ongjin Peninsula, was the scene of much of the border disputes that the country fought with the ROK. Capturing this territory would also drastically reduce the DPRK'S border that it shared with the ROK and thus cut the area that it needed to protect.

Kim Kwang-soo of the Korean Military Academy argues against Cumings' claim that the gunfire exchanged by the two Koreas prior to 25 June constituted a part of the Korean War. He does, however, quote Stalin commenting that initiating battles at Ongjin would be useful as it would «help to disguise who initiated the combat activities» [Kim 2001, p. 14]. The scholar lays out the DPRK's four-stage plan that had its armies attacking and then swiftly moving to occupy the capital, Seoul, before advancing south toward Pusan [Ibid., p. 18].

Kim draws from two documents that at the time had not been considered as they had just recently been made public from the Soviet archives. The information they carried convinced him beyond doubt that the initial attack on 25 June came from the north, and Kim Il Sung's «counterattack» was in fact the aggressive action by the DPRK military that started the war. One document was authored by a Lieutenant-General Vladimir Razuvaev, Chief of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces in P'yŏngyang. The general's report outlined attack plans drawn primarily by the Soviet Union. The second document was a war narrative from the day of attack through May 1951 compiled by the Soviet General Staff [Kim 2001, p. 13]. Here Kim found that the initial war plan had the DPRK military attacking south, representing the attack as a response to a ROK attack, and halting operations after occupying Seoul to leave the task of completing the invasion to the southern communists [Ibid., pp. 16-17]. The Razuvaev report in particular, if accurate, presents valuable evidence detailing the initial origins of the June 1950 fighting.

On June 25, units of the 3rd Border Security Brigade in the Ongjin peninsula stopped enemy attacks on the north of the 38th parallel by previously organized fires and, after executing preparatory artillery fires for 30 minutes, began to attack the enemy which had switched to defense. The Brigade advanced 2-2.5 km on the axis of the main attack around 6 o'clock [Ibid., p. 20].

Kim strengthens his arguments by comparing information contained in these newly-obtained documents against that of other documents previously made available, including DPRK documents that the U.S. captured during the war. His research demonstrates that the war was initiated for the sole purpose of peninsular unification; although the Soviets played a

major role in helping the Koreans develop the war plans, Stalin appears to have had no further ambitions to extending the war beyond the Korean Peninsula. He is also critical of those such as Cumings who have argued that the war's roots had been sowed years earlier, from the time of Korea's liberation. He admits that definitive knowledge of the actual events can only be based on indirect reports rather than those from direct witnesses. Like others looking at Soviet and Chinese documents, Kim fails to consider an equally important side of the Korean War narrative: the ambitions and actions of the ROK over this time.

There is also hard evidence showing that Kim Il Sung had learned that the ROK knew of his plans to attack and thus he had to quickly revise this initial plan. This adds question to the ROK claim that the DPRK attack was sudden, a surprise. As John Foster Dulles peered across the thirty-eighth into the DPRK, Shtykov cabled Moscow to report to Stalin that a frantic Kim Il Sung was ranting that the ROK had uncovered his plans of attack. He had, therefore, to change the plan to extend the attack across the entire width of the Peninsula. The Soviet Ambassador explained:

The Southerners have learned the details of the forthcoming advance of the [Korean People's Army]. As a result, they are taking measures to strengthen the combat of their troops. Defence lines are reinforced and additional units are concentrated in the Ongjin direction... Instead of a local operation at Ongjin peninsula as a prelude to a general offensive, Kim Il Sung suggests an overall attack on 25 June along the whole front line [Torcov 2001, p. 119; Weathersby 2002, p. 15].

That the ROK was on to the DPRK's plans and believed by the north to be preparing an attack is verified in a lengthy two-volume history of the war by ROK scholar Pak Myŏng-rim [Pak 2003, p. 388-89]. This piece of information obscures our understanding on who fired the initial shot. Both sides had their guns readied to fire across the parallel on the morning of 25 June.

Pak's massive study is perhaps the most complete account of the war in Korean historiography. As with other scholars whose research has benefited from the new findings from newly released documents, Pak clearly states at the onset of his study that there can no longer be any doubt that it was the DPRK that first launched the attack on June 1950 [Ibid., p. 34]. Yet, the origins of the war, he argues, run deeper. His study also argues that the social ideological changes occurring on either side during the years prior to the war to be relevant to the war's origins, primarily from the time of the 1948 order (48 *nyŏn chilsŏ*) over which time the DPRK and the ROK developed into separate states. Pak claims that this point differs from those who approach the war from a foreign diplomatic perspective [Ibid., p. 42].

### 5. *The ROK ambitions up through June 1950*

Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis, after sifting through research produced from the new information that briefly poured out of the Chinese and Russian archives, titled his revised history of this period *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*. Concerning the Korean War origins, he writes that «after repeated attempts, Kim got the green light from Stalin early in 1950, while all Rhee received from Washington were yellow lights shading over into red» [Gaddis 1998, p. 71]. True, this is the general narrative of the war's origins, and it does correctly reveal that Rhee (unsuccessfully) tried to engage the United States in a war previous to June 1950. However, from this new evidence we have learned far more on the DPRK ambitions than those of the ROK. With the important exception of few, such as Bruce Cumings and A. B. Abrams, the actions of Syngman Rhee and other ROK officials leading up to the Korean War have been neglected. As there are many unanswered (perhaps unanswerable) holes regarding this side of the story, we are limited to address them as questions, rather than facts [Caprio 2011].

What is known is that Korean President Syngman Rhee was just as eager, if not more so, to initiate battles to unite the two halves of the Korean Peninsula; he also refused to join the DPRK, China, and the UN Command in signing the July 1953 Armistice, a cease fire that ended the fighting but not the war. Rather, Rhee tried to prolong the war. By the time the Korean War erupted Rhee had caused a number of disturbances that contributed to the peninsula's division. Indeed, it seemed that division followed the time he left Korea to live what would amount to close to four decades overseas from the 1910s. The divisions that he caused as the first president of the Korean Provisional Government (KPG), formed by overseas Koreans in Shanghai, China in 1919, forced a number of important cabinet members to leave the political body in the early 1920s Rhee was eventually driven from office but would serve as the KPG's representative in Washington, D.C. during the Pacific War. With General MacArthur's assistance, he returned to southern Korea in October 1945, earlier than other overseas Korean leaders. Perhaps calculating that he could not win an election with the entire peninsula voting, he became one of the first, if not the first, to advance the idea of a separate southern Korean state. His role in the anti-trusteeship movement from early 1946 was a prime factor for the breakup of the United States-Soviet Union Joint Commission that was to consult with peninsular democratic groups to form a united Korean government<sup>19</sup>. Rhee and other Korean politicians objected to the idea that a weak Korean state would be

19. The U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission, which met over 60 times and dragged on into October 1947, broke down in a disagreement over which Korean groups the Commission should consult to form a unified provisional government: with the Soviet Delegation insisting that any group that expressed disagreement with the process not be eligible for consultation, and the U.S. countering that the democratic right to free

subjected to up to five years of trusteeship tutelage in responsible political governance and economic policy to ensure that it would not become the centre of regional power efforts to control the peninsula as had been the case in the decades leading up to its annexation by Japan in 1910. A plan to place the peninsula under trusteeship that would last up to five years prior to Korea gaining its sovereignty was drawn up in December 1945 by the foreign ministers of the U.S., the Soviet Union, and Great Britain who met in Moscow to resolve lingering World War II issues. The U.S.-Soviet Commission that was formed soon after met for two years to enact this plan, but even before the Commission disbanded in October 1947, the U.S. petitioned the United Nation's Security Council to address the Korean issue. The Soviet Union refusal to cooperate with the Council's efforts led to both states holding separate elections, which led to the formation of the ROK (August) and the DPRK (September). Rhee refused to recognize eleventh-hour efforts by his two major rivals, Kim Ku and Kim Kyu-sic, to negotiate with the northern Koreans a plan to unify the Korean state. This occurred just before the May 1948 elections, which caused the two Kims to boycott the elections and thus handing Rhee the presidency virtually unopposed.

Over the two years between the formation of the ROK and the beginning of the Korean War, Rhee initiated numerous discussions with U.S. officials, and planned and carried out numerous attempts to invade the north. One such discussion that the president held with U.S. Ambassador John Muccio took place in February 1949, just before the U.S. withdrew most of its military personnel from the ROK. At this time Rhee put forth his arguments as to why the ROK forces were ready for battle: The ROK could increase its armed forces by 100,000 if they enlisted Korean soldiers who had fought against the Japanese in the Pacific War and against the Chinese Communists in China's yet unfinished civil war. The ROK army's morale, he estimated, was stronger than that of DPRK soldiers; should the ROK attack first it could expect to benefit from mass enemy defections. Muccio's response left open the possibility of an ROK attack, but only after the U.S. forces had withdrawn. He warned Rhee against initiating such an operation while U.S. troops remained on Korean soil [United States Department of State 1976, 956-958]. The ROK president, honoured this warning only partially. The ROK's attempts to engage the DPRK in battle by initiating border insurrections began from May 1949, a month before the U.S. withdrew the majority of its troops from southern Korea in June. Cumings writes that these battles took «hundreds of lives and embroil[ed] thousands of troops». He argues that the ROK engaged in these battles to prolong the presence of U.S. troops, on which, according to an Army G-2 study, «their own positions, fortunes, and perhaps even their lives depended» [Cumings 1990, p. 388].

speech should allow as many groups as possible to participate, even if they voiced objections to the system.



A second question revolves around Rhee's February 1950 visit to Tokyo to meet with General Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur served as commander of the U.S. forces in the Northeast Asian region and oversaw the U.S. occupation administrations in Japan directly, and in southern Korea indirectly. Upon arrival, Rhee indicated at a press conference that his intention for visiting Tokyo at this time was to improve relations with the Japanese in an effort to strengthen the frontline against the communist threat. The ROK president, who enjoyed close relations with MacArthur – he was given use of the general's private plane, the *Bataan*, on multiple occasions – met often with the general during his visit. Transcripts of their discussions, however, do not exist. Wada Haruki cites MacArthur as mentioning the possibility of the U.S. using nuclear weapons should China or Russia enter the war [Wada 2002, p. 127]. Rhee did include hints of these discussions in a letter to Robert Oliver, a long-time close friend and confidant who would author a number of biographies on Rhee. In a letter that Rhee titled «military problems», he included the following paragraph that summarized in part his discussions with MacArthur.

When I was in Tokyo I made the statement [to MacArthur] that Russia is supplying the Northern forces and that Russia is pressing them to invade the South as soon as “the dust settles in China”. You know that there was nothing new in that statement because the Soviets have continually supplied the North. However, at the present moment the Soviets do not wish to be accused of this complicity, and that is exactly why I made the statement. As a result, the order has been given from Moscow to withdraw all forces from the North during the next two months [Rhee to Oliver, March 1950].

Unfortunately, Rhee does not offer any hints as to MacArthur's reaction. But this short excerpt of a rather lengthy letter clearly demonstrates that the two discussed the possibility of the United States assisting the ROK in the case of war. It also suggests, with less clarity, that Rhee and MacArthur had direct information on Soviet-DPRK discussions<sup>20</sup>. It is important to note that Rhee visited Tokyo after Stalin had agreed to support Kim in January 1950, but before the two communist leaders actually got together in Moscow later that year. Unfortunately, the little information available on the Kim-Stalin meeting is still more than that available on the Rhee-MacArthur

20. Rhee's remarks must be read with a degree of caution. Even during the war, as well as after Japan's surrender, he was known for making exaggerated statements to U.S. officials in order to obtain his goals, most often confirmation of U.S. support for Korean governments. However, as demonstrated in the *HQ, USAFIK Intelligence Summary, Northern Korea*, a three-volume collection of intelligence reports on northern Korea, mostly drafted by spies in the north and gathered before the Korean War, the U.S. had access to sensitive information regarding military matters in northern Korea.

discussions. Soon after returning to the ROK, on 1 March and on other occasions, Rhee again urged his country to attack the north [Cumings 1990, p. 481; Abrams 2020, pp. 43–47]. The various hints of Rhee's intentions in the years prior to June 1950 strongly suggest the need for a more complete account of the war from ROK sources. A number of the telegrams, for example, describe Kim Il Sung as acting hysterical while he requested Stalin's assistance. Whether these outbursts by Kim can be linked to DPRK military encounters with the ROK military requires consideration.

## 6. *Japan's role in the Korean war*

Another angle of the Korean War's origins that has received more attention as of recent is the role played by Japan. The pacifist terms of Japan's surrender in 1945, as well as its 1947 post-war «peace» constitution that forbade the Japanese from forming a military, on paper prohibited Japan from participating in this war. Yet, as we have seen, both the Soviets and the Chinese not only anticipated the possibility of Japan's intervention, but during the war Moscow even brought before the United Nations the accusation that Japan was participating in the war<sup>21</sup>. It is fair to question the degree to which the United States would have engaged its militaries in the war had it not been able to enlist Japanese assistance as, to use a Korean scholar's words, a «base-state» [*kichi kukka*] [Nam 2018]. Yet, Japan's proximity to the Korean Peninsula, as well as the dismal condition of its economy, presented the islands as an ideal case for what University of Chicago professor Paul Poast termed the «Iron Law of War» – «the idea that war produces economic booms» [Poast 2005]. Japan's underuse of resources, both human and material, were problems that the Korean War helped resolve. Indeed, the one point emphasized in Japanese and Korean textbooks regarding Japan's participation in the war was the war's role in driving the initial stage of Japan's post-war economic recovery [ARKS 2000, p. 298; Kim et al 2014, p. 381].

The explanation of Japan's participation in the Korean War goes beyond the economic gains that the war brought to the archipelago. It also can be seen as the beginning of the rejuvenation of the Japanese military. With the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, Japan created a 75,000-man National Police Reserve and dramatically increased the size of its coast

21. The Soviet Union had solid evidence from Japanese captured and killed in the early years of the war that the Japanese were engaged in the fighting [Ōnuma 2006; Nishimura 2004; Fujiwara 2020]. It must be noted that a larger number of Japan-based Koreans, many of whom spoke Japanese but not Korean [Kim 2007] and could have been mistaken for Japanese, also fought, and died, on the peninsula. A small number of Japanese found themselves briefly fighting with the Chinese, as well, on the Korean Peninsula [Yamaguchi 2006].

guard, both at the United States insistence<sup>22</sup>. Japan also contributed to the U.S.'s September landing at In'chŏn and elsewhere by sending minesweepers to the harbours to clear the mines to allow for the landings. This caused a number of Japanese deaths as a Landing Ship Tank [LST] exploded after it contacted mines during these operations. Japanese who had been employed at Japan-based U.S. military bases followed U.S. units to the peninsula and were even given weapons to use during DPRK attacks. Funerals for the deceased Japanese were held often in secret; families were also kept in the dark over the circumstances that the deceased had experienced in Korea.

The U.S. bases in Japan increased both in size and number during the war, thus offering unemployed Japanese work at higher-than-average wages. U.S. aircraft left from Japanese bases to fly aerial bombing raids on Korean cities, mostly in the DPRK but also in the ROK. Finally, Japan created or expanded facilities to entertain soldiers granted Rest and Recuperation (R & R) leave from the war. This alone added hundreds of millions of dollars every year of the war to a Japanese economy that graciously welcomed the hard currency that the soldiers paid for the services provided by Japan's «water industry» (bars, hotels, and brothels and the like) [Norma 2020, p. 370]. On the one hand, Japan, still under U.S. occupation for most of the war, had no choice but to submit to U.S. demands at this time. On the other hand, as indicated by Yoshida's call for Japan's full cooperation noted above, it also did so most willingly, and benefitted quite handsomely in the process<sup>23</sup>.

### *7. Conclusion: Unanswered questions to the Korean war's origins*

Barbara F. Walter [2022], in her study on civil wars, argues that they tend to break out when a society finds itself in-between autocracy and democracy, when a people have gained a sense of the benefits of a democratic society but are blocked from attaining this society by rival forces. She argues that such conflicts, which gradually evolve rather than suddenly break out, result from the conflicting sides hardening their views, instead of compromising. Walter's arguments can be useful to explain the situation that the Korean people faced just after their liberation from colonial rule. Over the years that followed Japan's defeat and Korea's liberation and occupation, the Soviet Union and the U.S. quickly threw their support behind extremist politics that displayed no interest in negotiating, much less compromising, to reunite the peninsula. Not only did the two occupiers fail to deliver in their promise to guide Koreans in the mechanics of responsible politics and eco-

22. This National Police force expanded in 1954 to form Japan's Self-Defence Forces (*jieitai*), which now has over 250,000 active members.

23. Yoshida, and others, famously saw the war as a «gift» in its timing.

nomics. Their administrations soon supported leaders who mirrored their respective interests, too: the U.S. to contain the spread of communism and the Soviet Union to form a buffer zone against possible attacks in Asia. Both superpowers appear to have been satisfied with the status quo; it was the Koreans who aimed to reunify the peninsula through war after peaceful means had failed.

The two Koreas could not have contemplated initiating belligerence against their rival without the help of their patron superpower. Documentary evidence shows that in the end a reluctant Stalin agreed to work with Kim Il Sung to launch such an attack. Yet, Stalin also insisted that the Soviet Army would not enter the fighting, and he predicted that the U.S. would not, as well. The Soviet leader did not want to go down in history as the instigator of World War III. Thus, both the U.S. and the Soviets erred in their assumptions about each other: the U.S. in placing the total blame on the Soviets' shoulders for using the attack as an initial step in a wider effort, and the Soviets in assuming that the U.S. would stay out of this Asian war as it had the civil war in China. Documents released in the 1990s have increased our knowledge of the Soviet-DPRK-China triangle, none more importantly perhaps than the content of the meetings that Kim held with Stalin and then with Mao in early 1950. This increases the importance that the February 1950 MacArthur-Rhee talks, as well as those that may have included Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, may bring to our understanding of the war's origins.

This review suggests that discussions on the origins of the war, for the most part, remain fixated on the events of the last weekend of June 1950<sup>24</sup>. Thus, the emphasis remains on the surrounding international community rather than on the two Korean states, which had been engaged in battles along the thirty-eighth parallel for at least one year in advance. Both sides had had to deal with «domestic» insurrections from the time of the U.S. and Soviet arrivals in 1945. Both halves entertained suspicions that the other had plans to attack in the near future. The leaders of both Koreas had voiced on numerous occasions their willingness to attack the other ever since the states had been created in mid-1948. And both leaders sought the support of their former occupier to carry out an attack. Perhaps, the best conclusions to draw is that first, we will never know who initiated the fighting on 25 June 1950, and second, determining this may be of secondary importance to our understanding of this rivalry in a broader perspective,

24. More recently discussion regarding the Korean War have moved to different topics. One special issue of the *Journal of Korean Studies* edited by Charles Armstrong [2013] includes articles on the Armistice agreement. A book edited by Tessa Morris-Suzuki [2018] contains chapters on how the war affected neighbouring countries including Japan. Japanese and Korean scholars have also been active in researching Japan's role in the war [In Korean Yi 2003, Nam 2016; in Japanese Ishimaru 2008, Fujiwara 2020].

from Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule onwards. The legacy of the Korean War lives through the division of the peninsula and the present DPRK nuclear potential, the former initiated by the U.S. in the closing days of the Pacific War and the latter the communist state's answer to U.S. threats to use nuclear weapons both during the war and its aftermath.

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