Soviet Involvement in the Korean War: 
A New View 
from the Soviet-era Archives

In order to begin to understand the military, political, and diplomatic forces that shaped the Cold War, it is useful to start with what we now know of the Soviet Union’s military participation in the Korean War. Before scholars gained access to previously top secret Soviet-era archives in the early 1990s, they could only guess at the extent of Joseph Stalin’s direct involvement (1).

That the Soviets trained and equipped Kim Il Sung’s Korean People’s Army (KPA, the North Korean Army) and supplied weapons to Mao Zedong’s Chinese People’s Volunteer Army (CPVA) has never been in doubt. However, the wartime activities of Soviet MiG-15 fighter pilots, radar operators, and anti-aircraft gunners were, until recently, kept secret. U.S. Air Force pilots often reported hearing Russian spoken over the radio and sighting distinctly non-Chinese pilots while fighting in the northwest corner of Korea known as “MiG Alley,” but the extent of this involvement was unknown. Recent research in the Soviet-era archives in Russia not only verifies the direct involvement of Soviet units, but also provides an inside view of Stalin’s high-level diplomacy and the military deployments that implemented these policies. This evidence indicates that the Soviet dictator pursued a policy designed to ensure Chinese troops would shoulder most of the burden of defending East Asia (2).

Historical Context

The superpower confrontation in the Korean War was as much the result of historical accident, bad timing, and diplomatic blundering as it was calculation. The fate of Korea was of such minor consequence that Stalin readily agreed with the U.S. request that the Red Army limit its post-World War II occupation of Korea at the 38th parallel.

As the alliance between the Western powers and the Soviet Union disintegrated at the end of World War II, the Soviets began arming and training Kim Il Sung’s forces in North Korea, while the United States did the same, albeit less lavishly, with the forces of Syngman Rhee in South Korea. For the better part of the late 1940s, neither the U.S. nor the Soviet Union had any interest in promoting a conflict on the Korean peninsula. By 1949, however, the situation had changed dramatically.

In the Cold War confrontation in Europe, Stalin had suffered a series of embarrassing, and potentially dangerous, foreign policy setbacks. The Marshall Plan, Yugoslavian President Josip Tito’s move down a “Separate Road,” the failure of the 1948–1949 Berlin Blockade, and the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) were among a series of reverses that put the Soviet Union on the defensive by 1949. Stalin reacted by increasing his direct control over Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary through bloody repression. Washington, its foreign policy increasingly guided by a fierce anti-Communist fervor, viewed this repression as an indication of Soviet designs on the rest of the world.

While NATO was the realization of Stalin’s worst nightmares regarding his security in Europe, other events in 1949 produced similar fears among U.S. political and military leaders. That August, the Soviets detonated their first atomic bomb. Although the U.S.S.R. had only copies of U.S. B-29 bombers to deliver atomic weapons, the United States was stunned that Soviet scientists had managed to end the atomic monopoly so quickly (3). In October, Mao Zedong announced the creation of the People’s Republic of China signaling the impending victory of Communism in the world’s most populous nation. Five months before this declaration, Liu Shaoqi, future commander of the Chinese Air Force, had visited Moscow seeking Soviet support in the creation of a modern air force (4). This combination of European failures and Asian successes kindled Stalin’s interest in North Korea.

The Start of the War

Between 1945 and 1950 the relative importance of North Korea (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or DPRK) had not
increased dramatically, and Stalin had refused Kim II Sung’s repeated requests for permission to invade South Korea. By 1950, however, Stalin saw an opportunity to build on Communist success in Asia and, by so doing, relieve some of the pressure on the Soviet Union in Europe. He also sought to bring Mao’s successful revolution into line with the Soviet Union’s foreign policy goals.

In April 1950 Kim II Sung again begged for a chance to unify Korea, promising that the campaign would be over in three days. Stalin gave his permission, provided that the Chinese agreed to support the North Korean action (5). Mao, in desperate need of Soviet military and economic aid, quickly agreed. Mao also released over sixty thousand combat-hardened ethnic Koreans from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) for duty with the Korean People’s Army (KPA, the North Korean Army).

The KPA’s Soviet advisory staff drew up the assault plan for the attack on South Korea, and on 25 June 1950 North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel in an effort to unify Korea under DPRK rule. Two days later President Harry S. Truman ordered U.S. airmen, sailors, and soldiers into action to stop the KPA’s advance and, significantly, he also commanded ships to block the Straits of Formosa. The intervention of the U.S. 7th Fleet saved the remnants of the Chinese nationalist forces opposed to Mao and led by Chiang Kai-shek. This assistance from the U.S. virtually guaranteed Mao’s entry into the Korean War.

Mao’s release of the PLA veterans assisted the North Korean army as it drove south. The combined forces quickly pushed South Korean and U.S. forces (rushed in from Japan) into the Pusan perimeter in the extreme southeastern corner of Korea (6). Nevertheless, superior U.S. air power managed to slow the North Korean offensive (7).

Soviet-Chinese Negotiations

While the United States rallied the support of the United Nations during the fortuitous absence of the Soviet representative, Stalin and Mao negotiated the level and price of Chinese involvement. In August 1950, the Soviet Union redeployed some of its MiG-15 units already in China to the Andong airbase along the border between Manchuria and North Korea. In this position, the Soviet jets could cover Chinese military forces massing along the border and prevent U.S. air attacks on Manchurian targets. However, Stalin ordered Soviet pilots not to cross the Yalu River into North Korea, even after several errant U.S. bombers crossed this border (8).

In September U.N. forces landed at Inchon behind KPA lines and simultaneously broke out of the Pusan perimeter forcing the KPA to withdraw from South Korea. In early October, as U.N. forces prepared to cross the 38th parallel into North Korea, negotiations between Stalin and Mao intensified. In late September, Stalin took the extreme step of ordering two Soviet fighter regiments to defend the North Korean capital of Pyongyang. Soviet Minister of Defense Aleksandr M. Vasilevskii pointed out that these units, equipped with outdated propeller aircraft and lacking radar and anti-aircraft defenses, would be extremely vulnerable to U.S. air attack. Vasilevskii also noted, while moving to carry out Stalin’s orders, that it would be impossible to hide the fact that Soviet pilots were actively engaged in combat (9).

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Stalin did not want to invite U.S. B-29 attacks on Soviet or Chinese cities, and so halted his order to send Soviet pilots into North Korea. Meanwhile, Stalin was pressuring Mao to send the Chinese infantry to defend North Korea, but the Chinese leader demanded Soviet air support in exchange for his cooperation. Between 2 and 14 October ciphered telegram traffic between Beijing and Moscow included many promises and threats. During this period, Stalin also began making preparations to take in elements of the retreating North Korean army and Kim II Sung’s government. As the U.N. forces pushed past Pyongyang and on toward the Manchurian border, Mao finally agreed to send his troops into North Korea (10).

Russian and Chinese sources still disagree on what exactly Stalin promised Mao in order to secure Chinese intervention. The documents thus far available from the Russian archives indicate that Stalin never planned to use his MiG-15s and anti-aircraft forces for anything other than defending Chinese industry and supply lines. However, the Chinese claim that Stalin promised complete air support for their ground forces.

In any event, the Chinese army went into combat against U.S. and South Korean troops in late October 1950 without air cover or bomber support. This alleged betrayal by Stalin was a critical point in the eventual breakdown in Sino-Soviet relations. While it is certainly possible that Stalin made promises to the Chinese in Moscow that he later reneged on, there is currently no evidence to suggest that he took any steps to change the military deployments already underway in northeast China (11).
Most Soviet air divisions deployed to China were sent to defend Chinese industrial cities along the eastern coast, the Beijing area, and Manchurian cities. Only two Soviet air divisions were deployed at any one time to defend the airspace over “MiG Alley.” The first Soviet units deployed to the Andong airbase continued to train Chinese pilots while carrying out their defensive mission along the Yalu River.

The Chinese People’s Volunteer Army (CPVA) in North Korea began initial actions against U.N. forces in late October but did not launch its general offensive until the end of November. Soviet pilots began flying missions against the U.N. air forces on the afternoon of 1 November 1950. Apparently, this was in reaction to a reported U.S. air raid on North Korean planes on an airfield in Manchuria (12).

The Air War

The Korean War was in fact two separate wars. Following the initial successes of the CPVA during early 1951, the ground war settled into bloody artillery-dominated positional warfare around the 38th parallel that was reminiscent of World War I. The second war was conducted in the air over northwest Korea, where the Soviets fought to defend air space against U.S. bombers seeking to cut off vital supplies to Chinese and North Korean ground forces. In addition to the bombing raids, U.N. aircraft also fought air-superiority battles that pitted U.S. F-86 “Sabre” jets against the Soviet-piloted MiG-15s. Both Chinese and North Korean pilots eventually became involved in the aerial combat over “MiG Alley,” but the Soviets bore the brunt of the air defense fighting throughout the war (13).

The appearance of the MiG-15 and the ground control radar that vectored it to its target was nearly as great a surprise as the Soviet atomic bomb had been a year earlier. The cannon-equipped Soviet jet could fly higher and faster than even the F-86 and proved very effective at destroying the lumbering U.S. B-29s. In April and October 1951 the Soviets demonstrated their superiority over what was still the U.S. Air Force’s major atomic bomb delivery system in two major air battles. Following the “Black Tuesday” defeat on 23 October 1951, B-29s no longer operated during daylight hours and eventually were pulled out of combat in “MiG Alley” altogether. The ramifications for Washington’s atomic strategy were obvious and accelerated the development of tactical atomic weapons that could be dropped from jet fighter-bombers, which led eventually to missile-launched weapons (14).

The pilot training that the Soviets conducted throughout northeast China was just as important to the development of the Cold War as their combat mission. Stalin ordered MiG-9 and MiG-15 fighter units along with Tu-2 bomber and Il-10 ground attack units to deploy to China, train their Chinese colleagues, turn over their aircraft to the newly formed unit, and then return to the Soviet Union. Through this process, the U.S.S.R. helped China establish the third largest modern air force in the world (15). Although Chinese pilots still lacked many of the skills needed to fight U.S. F-86 pilots, as the war progressed they were an increasing factor in “MiG Alley.” A modern air force was one of Mao’s major goals in his relations with the U.S.S.R., and in this regard the People’s Republic of China took its first giant step toward superpower status during the aerial portion of the Korean War.

The air superiority battles in “MiG Alley” were more glamorous than the slaughter carried out on the ground, and they received much more press coverage from the U.N. side. In reality, most pilots engaged in the much less glamorous and more
lethal work of bombing and strafing ground targets. Anti-aircraft artillery and ground fire took the greatest toll of U.N. pilots over the battlefield. Close support aircraft and night flying B-26 and B-29 bombers flew more missions and died in greater numbers than did the high-flying sabre pilots.

One of the enduring myths of this conflict has been the general insistence by the U.S. Air Force that it fought in “MiG Alley” handicapped by the Manchurian sanctuary across the Yalu. The U.S. Air Force continues to maintain that its aircraft did not cross the Yalu to pursue MiG-15s and thus were sitting ducks for Communist aircraft diving at high speeds from across the border. This was indeed the case until April 1952 when U.S. F-86 pilots—apparently on their own initiative, but with the knowledge of their commanders—began attacking MiG-15s in Manchuria. On 21 April 1952, three Soviet pilots were shot down and killed while attempting to land at the Andong airbase. This change in tactics put Soviet, Chinese, and North Korean pilots on the defensive at their home bases and increased losses accordingly (16).

The U.S. Air Force and Navy continued their more aggressive posture during the late spring of 1952 when they launched a series of fighter-bomber strikes against the Suiho hydroelectric facilities up the Yalu from Andong. These raids succeeded in cutting off power to much of southern Manchuria and North Korea and marked a major failure for the Soviet fighters charged with their defense (17). Despite the increased air pressure, designed in part to accelerate the peace negotiations at Panmunjom, U.S. air power could not stop the flow of supplies to Communist ground forces. It did, however, reduce the flow to such levels that the Chinese and North Korean forces were unable to launch a successful ground offensive for the remainder of the war. The F-86, in the hands of highly trained U.S. pilots, was a better air-to-air fighter than the MiG-15, but Soviet and Chinese pilots fought tenaciously in the skies over northwest Korea until the 27 July 1953 armistice.

The War's End

Stalin’s death on 5 March 1953 had as much to do with the eventual end of the fighting in Korea as did the ground and air combat. The United States demonstrated its willingness to use military force to defend its perceived national interests even on the Asian mainland. The Soviet Union, unable to commit itself in Eastern Europe and East Asia, instead increased the combat capacity of China through technology transfer and limited commitment of combat forces.

Sadly, essential lessons from the Korean War went unlearned. In Vietnam, the United States again attempted to use massive air power and technological superiority to force a decision. The Soviet Union supplied North Vietnam with air defense weapons, including Soviet-manned surface-to-air missiles, and it trained North Vietnamese pilots. In this war, however, U.S. policy makers did keep in mind the possibility of Chinese and Soviet intervention when they declined to invade North Vietnam. We are now better able to understand complex relationships that resulted in the Korean War, and by doing so we can better understand the history of the last fifty years.

Endnotes

1. Kathryn Weathersby was among the first Western scholars to gain access to Soviet-era archives in the early 1990s. Her findings have been published in a series of Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) Bulletins, beginning with Issue 3 (Fall 1993). This author’s own archival research is the basis for his dissertation. See Mark O’Neill, “The Other Side of the Yalu: Soviet Pilots in the Korean War” (Dissertation: Florida State University, 1996). Two of the best works in English on Soviet involvement in the early Cold War are Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshkov, Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Vojtech Mastny, The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

2. Documents pertaining to the Soviet 64th Fighter Air Corps and its related units can be found in the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense (Tsentral’nii Arkhiv Ministerii Oboroni, or TsAMO) in Moscow and Podol’sk in fonds 64iak, 151gvi-iai, 50iaid, 324iaid, 303iaid, 97iaid, 216iaid, 32iaid and 190iaid. The first concrete evidence of direct Soviet involvement in the Korean War arose from interviews with former pilots. See G. Dyachenko, “The Time Has Come to Tell the Story: It was Korea,” Krasnaia Zvezda (25 June 1989), translated in Joint Publicaton Research Service-UMA-89-019: 13-15; Aleksandr Smortskov on Moscow International Service in Korea (11 June 1990), translated in Foreign Broadcast Information Service-SOV-90-121:9-10; and Georgii Lobov, “Blank Spots in History: In the Skies of North Korea,” Aviatsia i Kosmonovtitsa, 2 parts (10 October 1990), translated in Joint Publication Research Service-UAC-91-003: 27-31 and Joint Publication Research Service-UAC-91-004: 22-25.


7. Detailed discussion of the impact of U.S. air raids on KPA mobility and the efforts taken to reduce their effectiveness is found throughout a 1957 dissertation written by the chief Soviet military advisor and later Soviet ambassador to Pyongyang. See Lt. Gen. V. N. Razuzav, “Nekotorye Vvyody iz boevogo Opyta Koreiskoi Narodnoi Armii v Voine v Koree” (Dissertation: K. E.
B-29 Superfortress bombers of the U.S. Far East Air Forces Bomber Command unleash a concentrated attack on North Korean supply centers, 30 January 1951. (Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, NWDNS-342-AF-7877AC.)

Voroshilov Military Academy, 1957), available on microfiche through EastView Publications, Minneapolis, MN.

8. TsAMO: fond 16, opis 3139, delo 16, list 1.
11. Orders issued to Soviet air units did not change their deployment or mission. See, for example, TsAMO: fond 16, opis 3139, delo 15, list 12-15.
12. TsAMO: fond 151 gv.iad, opis 152688ss, delo 7, list 2.
13. O’Neill, “The Other Side of the Yalu,” and German and Seidov, Red Devils. These sources indicate the high levels of Soviet combat during the war.
14. Some of the best descriptions of “Black Tuesday” (Chernyi oktyabr') and other battles with U.S. B-29s can be found in

TsAMO: fond 151 gv.iad, opis 152688ss, delo 7, listi 38-39; Lobov, “Blank Spots;” German and Seidov, Red Devils, 120-35; and TsAMO: fond 303 iad, opis 174133ss, delo 1.
17. TsAMO: fond 16, opis 3139, delo 131, list 3-18.

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