



# The Korean War and its Legacy

## HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2019

### Online course, Week 4: Chinese intervention in the Korean War

After looking at the reasons for British involvement in the Korean War last week, the Fellows this week were considering the Chinese intervention in the latter part of 1950. Fellows were asked to consider a range of resources, but particularly two articles which took contrasting approaches to the issue.

The contrasts were not difficult to see:

- *Hoare notes that the fledgling CCP regime in Beijing is worried about US intentions in East Asia in general and extremely watchful about developments in Korea due to its border with China. However, it is only when the UN forces go beyond the 38th Parallel and head towards the Chinese border that the Chinese build up troops on the border and decide to intervene in the War. They are fearful of a US invasion of China so worried about National Security. Hoare's final rhetorical question indicates his position; he wonders "whether people really to go war for ideology, I don't know?"*
- *Jian's argument seems focused on stating that Chinese involvement in Korea was very much to do with ideology and the need to spread Communism in the Cold War world. He points out that China was actively seeking a Sino-Soviet alliance from 1949 and he suggests that China was privy to Kim's plans to reunify Korea in 1950 and had committed the Chinese to helping him long before UN forces crossed the 38th Parallel. He also suggests that Mao was in very close contact with Stalin and desperate to establish close relations with him.*

Many of the Fellows were sceptical of the approach taken by Jian, taking us into one of the most fascinating aspects of history – how context of the historian may or may not shape the accounts that the historian writes:

- *The evidence presented does seem to more strongly support the Hoare position and therefore one cannot help but ask once again why is the 'New Cold War Historian' Jian taking the line he is? Might it be something to do with his work being funded by the Woodrow Wilson Center? Is he just striving to give them what they want? And isn't it interesting that the publication [date] of his article, 1992, corresponds to the period of Sino-American rapprochement rupturing, after the collapse of the USSR, [which] rendered this marriage of convenience less useful, a contextual point that Hoare highlights.*
- *I found the Jian article fascinating though and it made me think... how and why historians come up with the interpretations that they do... This is because he is writing for the Wilson Centre but also because of his somewhat dubious selection of*

*sources – many of them recollections as opposed to official documents, plus he even casts doubt on his own conclusions at times claiming he doesn't really have the evidence to back up his own inferences!*

Inevitably many of the Fellows had to reconcile themselves to the old adages that in particular fields of History it is very difficult to access source material:

- *It's difficult to be certain because of the lack of Chinese sources, but it's certainly conceivable (according to Khrushchev's memoirs) that Stalin had endorsed Kim Il Sung's plan to unify Korea through military means when he visited the USSR around the same time as Mao. However, even if this is not the case, it is clear that KIS informed Mao of his plan during his visit to China on the way back from the USSR. Therefore, the USSR and China had at least some prior knowledge of North Korea's war preparations. Given that following this, Mao then returned as many as 70,000 troops of Korean nationality from the PLA back to Korea, it is a reasonable assumption that Mao and the CCP did not oppose the attack, even if they did not actively support it.*

... and that simple answers rarely if ever do justice to complex events:

- *Chinese involvement after 1951 – did ideology become more important at this stage in the conflict? Both Jian and Hoare support the idea that Chinese involvement in the Korean War increased Chinese standing on the world stage, particularly in their relationship with the USSR. However, Jian indicates that this relationship was already well underway by 1949, with Liu Shaoqi's visit to Moscow. Jian also indicates that Mao seemed well aware that the UNO's stated intention in Korea was to return the border to the 38th Parallel. Once the war had reached the stalemate in 1951, why did China continue to fight? It seems to me that ideology became more important at this stage in the war.*

One further, and extremely important, issue emerging from the readings and from the input we got from Professor Kathryn in Athens was why the war continued after the conflict had clearly reached a stalemate in 1951. Many of our colleagues on Twitter asked about this question and the answer was intriguing and revealing:

- *Once the war had reached the stalemate in 1951, why did China continue to fight? It seems to me that ideology became more important at this stage in the war: prolonging the war gave Mao time to modernize the People's Army and to vocalise support for a world revolutionary movement that was currently at war with a common enemy in Korea. More pragmatically, it allowed Mao to dispose of veterans of the Chinese Nationalist Army.*

## Core resources

- Chen Jian, 'The Sino-Soviet Alliance and China's Entry into the Korean War', *Cold War International History Project Working Paper*, 2011  
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-sino-soviet-alliance-and-chinas-entry-the-korean-war>

## Secondary sources

- Donggil Kim, "Prelude to War? The Repatriation of Koreans from the Chinese PLA, 1949-50," *Cold War History*, 12, 2 (May 2012), pp.227-244.

## Primary sources

- Wilson Center (role of China)  
<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/188/china-and-the-korean-war>
- Wilson Center (role of USSR)  
<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/134/korean-war-origins-1945-1950>  
and their interest in the peninsula prior to the war breaking out in 1950.

## Additional reading

- Zihua Shen, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
- Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (Columbia University Press, 1994).