

Review - Mao, Stalin and the Korean War

Written by William W. Stueck

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Review - Mao, Stalin and the Korean War

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/09/18/review-mao-stalin-and-the-korean-war/>

WILLIAM W. STUECK, SEP 18 2012

Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s
By: Shen Zhihua. Translated by: Neil Silver
Routledge, 2012



In its traditional form diplomatic history has long been criticized in the West as narrow and uninteresting, at its worst the story of what one diplomat said to another. With the “cultural turn” during the 1990s, that criticism became prominent within the field itself. The book under review, a translation of a study published a decade ago in Chinese, provides a useful reminder of the continuing utility of old fashioned approaches, as well as their limitations. Through a meticulous reconstruction of the available evidence on what Soviet, Chinese, and North Korean diplomats and decision-makers said to each other, Chinese scholar Shen Zhihua provides a vivid account of the origins and course of the Korean War from the Communist side, especially the period before the commencement of armistice negotiations in July 1951. Translator Neil Silver also includes his translation, from Chinese, of an essay review by Yang Kuisong that challenges some of Shen’s conclusions on the origins of the conflict based in part on additional sources. Shen’s limited use of English-language sources is a liability on some points. The research of Shen and others since 2002 shed new light only on parts of the story, and Shen’s approach certainly is narrow, by the standards of the expanded field of diplomatic history in the United States. Nevertheless, his commitment to carefully and dispassionately evaluating and reconstructing evidence provides a model of scholarship from which many American scholars could learn a great deal.

Shen begins by asserting that in early 1950 Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin’s green light to North Korean leader Kim Il-sung for an all-out military attack on South Korea represented one step in a sharp departure in the Soviet approach to

Review - Mao, Stalin and the Korean War

Written by William W. Stueck

East Asia. What had been since 1945 “a relatively moderate and conservative policy” to complement a more assertive one in Europe “shifted toward toughness and confrontation.” Shen explains this departure as an outgrowth of changing international conditions due to the Communist victory on mainland China during 1949.

This view is neither new nor particularly controversial. He goes on to argue, however, that in Stalin’s mind this event actually weakened the Soviet position in northeast Asia as it led Chinese Communist chief Mao Zedong to press for negotiation of a new Sino-Soviet treaty to replace the one Stalin had concluded with Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek in 1945. That treaty had restored the rights to the Soviet Union in Manchuria that Russia had lost to the Japanese at the turn of the century. Mao wanted those rights for joint operation of the Changchun Railway and special privileges in the ice-free ports of Lushin and Dalian returned exclusively to China. Although agreeing to these demands would potentially weaken the Soviet strategic position in the region, Stalin acceded to Mao’s wishes in the belief that not doing so would put him at loggerheads with what otherwise could be an ally against the United States. Yet to regain what Stalin believed he was losing, Shen continues, he gave in to the admonishments of Kim for assistance in unifying Korea. Should Kim succeed, the Soviet Union would at least gain access to the ice-free ports of Inchon and Pusan. Should Kim fail, as a result of intervention by the United States, China would be threatened sufficiently to request the Soviet Union, at least temporarily, to maintain its position in Manchuria.

In his review Yang raises a series of objections to Shen’s interpretation. He argues that while Stalin was surely concerned about the emergence of a strong, united China, Stalin also saw distinct potential advantages to Mao’s rise in the Soviet Union’s Cold War struggle with the United States. Most importantly, Stalin viewed the Communist victory in China as altering the balance of power in Asia in favor of the Soviet Union. From the summer of 1949 onward he encouraged Mao to take the lead in promoting revolution in Southeast Asia and he agreed at the beginning of 1950 to a formal alliance with Mao that could only strengthen the Soviet position in Korea. He also admonished Communist party leaders in Japan and India to adopt militant tactics within their own countries and followed Mao in recognizing Ho Chi Minh’s Communist government in Vietnam. The Cold War had not been going well in Europe, to Stalin its key battleground, but with Communists on the march in Asia American power could be diverted, to some extent, to that secondary theatre. This diversion, in turn, would solidify the new China’s ties to the Soviet Union. This did not mean that Stalin thought it likely that a North Korean attack on the South would lead to direct U.S. military intervention on the peninsula. Indeed, according to Yang, he gave little thought to the possibility. However, he did believe that in general U.S. resources and attention would be shifted to the region.

Although the diversion hypothesis has long made sense, documentation emerged after Shen and Yang wrote on this topic that Stalin did give careful consideration to possible U.S. intervention in response to a North Korean attack. He thought such intervention unlikely, but he insisted in April 1950 meetings that Kim work with Soviet advisers in devising a plan that would both produce a speedy victory and make the North Korean operation appear as a counterattack against a South Korean provocation. In addition, Stalin insisted that Kim receive Mao’s approval for an attack, as if North Korea did run into difficulties with the United States it would have to depend on China to come to its aid with troops, rather than the Soviet Union. In mid-May Kim traveled to Beijing, received Mao’s grudging blessing for an attack and Mao’s assurance that Chinese divisions would be available, if necessary, to counter American action.

Space does not permit extensive coverage of Shen’s analysis of Mao’s road to intervention in the war, which takes up 40 pages compared to the 120 devoted to the origins of the North Korean attack. Suffice it to say that important new details have been added to the story since Shen wrote and they serve to emphasize the importance in the war’s evolution of the lack of coordination early on between Moscow and Beijing. (Thomas J. Christensen provides a detailed analysis based on the new evidence on both origins and the Chinese intervention in the second and third chapters of his *Worse Than A Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia*). Yet, Shen’s treatment of Stalin’s alleged renegeing in October 1950 on an earlier promise of air support for Chinese troops in Korea remains as good as we have. This treatment by Shen is remarkable for its objectivity on an issue that has generated a good deal of heat between Chinese and Russian scholars. Shen points out that Stalin’s promise of the previous July was very general and that the shrewd Soviet leader clearly outmaneuvered Mao, who before agreeing to intervene failed in his effort to get a precise commitment for immediate tactical air support for Chinese troops once they were in Korea.

Review - Mao, Stalin and the Korean War

Written by William W. Stueck

Shen claims, nonetheless, that Soviet materiel support to the Chinese war effort turned out to be most generous, that, “especially before the start of armistice talks, he [Stalin] supplied virtually everything that China requested.” This assertion based on Soviet sources is inconsistent with earlier accounts based on Chinese documents, including Shu Guang Zhang’s *Mao’s Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953*, and is sure not to be the last word.

Shen devotes a mere 25 pages to the more than two-and-a-half years of the war following Chinese intervention. He emphasizes the close coordination that occurred between Stalin and Mao, in sharp contrast to the earlier period. On the matter of who on the Communist side was the main instigator in delaying an armistice during 1952 and early 1953, Shen argues that Mao consistently took a hard line on the prisoner-of-war issue, even implying that Mao was the initiator and Stalin the more than willing follower. After Stalin’s death in March 1953 Shen suggests that it was the new Soviet leaders who pressed for the necessary concession to end the fighting, probably contrary to Mao’s inclination. Shen’s argument is plausible but certainly is in need of fuller documentation.

Given the dated nature of some of the information and Shen’s de-emphasis on ideology and domestic concerns, especially in the case of Mao, readers should be encouraged to consult the English-language works of Thomas Christensen and Shu Guang Zhang noted above as well as more recent articles by Shen himself and the earlier work of Chen Jian, both of which are mentioned in the selected bibliography and suggested further reading sections. Meanwhile, we can all hope that Shen’s continuing scholarship will lead eventually to a *magnum opus* and the laying to rest of many of the continuing controversies over the Communist side in the Korean War.

—

Dr. William W. Stueck is a Distinguished Research Professor within the Department of History at The University of Georgia, United States.

About the author:

Dr. William W. Stueck is a Distinguished Research Professor within the Department of History at The University of Georgia, United States.