For three decades, Vladislav Zubok and Vladimir Pechatnov have made uniquely valuable contributions to our understanding of Soviet foreign policy and Soviet-American relations by combining personal experience with elite Soviet institutions, a deep study of US policymaking, meticulous research in Russian and American sources, and thoughtful analysis. This article continues this excellent record. It tells the story of prominent US businessmen, lawyers, and philanthropists who interceded with Soviet officials during the Korean War out of fear that the peninsular conflict would expand into a global war. The authors persuasively demonstrate that, contrary to relentless Soviet propaganda about “war-mongering capitalists,” these representatives of “Wall Street” attempted to establish a back-channel to Moscow in order to prevent a broader war (594).

Zubok and Pechatnov’s detailed account of this fascinating episode is based primarily on reports to Moscow about the Americans’ initiatives which are housed in the Kremlin’s Presidential Archive and were written by Soviet officials who were stationed in the US, and the diaries of select American participants that are housed in the archive of the American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia. The authors are interested in what this unsuccessful attempt at private diplomacy reveals about the socio-historical history of US Cold War elites, the role of public diplomacy, and perceptions and misperceptions, particularly on the American side. They note that as the war in Korea escalated following the successful US amphibious landing at Inchon on 15 September 1950, diplomatic communications between the two superpowers were nearly non-existent. The efforts of these prominent Americans from the private sector were therefore particularly important, and their failure was a missed “chance to revive diplomacy between the main Cold War protagonists” (594).

The story of these failed initiatives is fascinating for what it reveals about the arrogance of American moneyed elites and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s realistic assessment of the limits of their influence on US foreign policy. The instigator these efforts, the prominent lawyer and National City Bank of New York Vice President William Lancaster, was well-known in Moscow for the role he had played in settling the Tsarist debt

---

issue in 1932. Clarence Pickett, who was executive secretary of the American Friends Service Committee, used his long-standing connections in the State Department to secure a briefing on the Korea situation on 11 September 1950 from Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Dean Rusk, who then contacted Lancaster to give the go-ahead for talks with Soviet officials in New York.

As interesting as the ensuing conversations were, the authors’ argument that they constituted a missed chance at diplomacy is, in my view, over-stated. They note that neither Stalin nor US President Harry Truman wanted the conflict in Korea to escalate into a war between the superpowers. However, they do not discuss the steadfast determination of the two leaders to prevent such escalation, which rendered a private back-channel unnecessary.2

Stalin’s main consideration regarding whether to approve North Korea leader Kim Il-sung’s request to reunify Korea by military means was whether such action would risk war with the United States. Calculating that it would in fact carry such risk, he refused the North Korean leader’s repeated entreaties throughout 1949. The Soviet leader gave his consent to a full-scale offensive against South Korea only in January 1950, after Washington’s adoption of the new strategic plan for East Asia that was outlined in NSC/48 appeared to signal that it would not intervene in Korea. Even then, however, Stalin made it clear to Kim Il-sung that he would not send Soviet troops to Korea. If the US intervened and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) needed help, it would have to turn to China.3

When the Truman administration responded to the June 25 attack by casting aside NSC-48 and called for an international coalition to repel the DPRK invasion, Stalin was shocked and alarmed. However, he declined to break Moscow’s boycott of the UN Security Council that was intended to prevent it from forming the UN Military Command, apparently out of fear such a step would link Moscow to the action in Korea. During the first weeks of the war, Stalin cautiously observed the rapid advance of the Korean People’s Army (KPA). However, after the US successfully landed forces at Inchon on 15 September, cutting off KPA troops in the South, and prepared to advance into North Korean territory, Stalin refused Kim Il-sung’s desperate entreaty to send Soviet ground forces to save the DPRK. Instead, the Soviet leader held to his earlier insistence that the North Koreans would have to turn to China.4

During the first two weeks of October, as the Chinese leadership debated whether they would, in fact, send the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to Korea to fight the world’s most powerful militaries, Stalin refused their urgent request to provide air cover, which was a necessity since the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had not yet built an air force. After days of fruitless negotiation, PRC leader Mao Zedong decided not to intervene without Soviet air cover. Unmoved, Stalin ordered Kim Il-sung to evacuate his remaining forces from the DPRK; he would sacrifice the North Korean state rather than risk military conflict with the US. The following day, the Chinese leadership decided to enter the war even without Soviet air cover and Stalin cancelled his evacuation order to Kim Il-sung. He insisted, however, that the PRC call its soldiers “Chinese People’s Volunteers” so that their intervention would not trigger the Sino-Soviet mutual security alliance concluded in February of that year. After Chinese forces successfully engaged UN troops in late October,

2 For a comprehensive examination of the US approach to the war in Korea, see William Stueck, The Korean War: An International History (Princeton, 1995); for an account of Stalin’s approach, see Shen Zhihua, Mao, Stalin, and the Korean War, Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s (Routledge, 2012); for an examination of US strategy toward the air war, see Conrad C. Crane, American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953 (Kansas, 2000).
3 For full citations of these documents, see Kathryn Weathersby, “The Soviet Union,” in James I. Matray and Donald W. Boose, Jr., The Ashgate Research Companion to the Korean War (Ashgate, 2014): 88-90.
Stalin decided it was worth sending Soviet air units to protect the Yalu River bridges over which Chinese soldiers and Soviet materiel were entering Korea. However, he refused to allow his pilots to fly outside the Yalu corridor so that their presence would not be exposed.\(^5\)

Truman, for his part, intervened in Korea in order to deter the Soviets from launching similar aggression in other areas along their border. Since his goal was to prevent a new global war, he was determined to avoid responding to Chinese and Soviet intervention in October/November 1950 with actions that risked escalating the war. He therefore never challenged the tissue-thin disguise of PLA soldiers as “People’s Volunteers” or the Soviet air units as North Koreans. American pilots heard enemy pilots speaking Russian over their radios as soon as they appeared in November 1950, in planes marked with DPRK insignia. In any case, they knew full well that only Soviet pilots could fly the planes they were now facing. The Soviet/American air war over Korea, which lasted until the armistice in July 1953, in fact became the largest military conflict between the superpowers of the entire Cold War. Nonetheless, the leaders of both sides remained so determined to avoid a broader war that they successfully kept the Soviet presence hidden from public view.\(^6\)

While Stalin’s strategy toward the war changed in January 1951, he remained determined to avoid escalation. After Chinese forces unexpectedly routed UN troops in the winter of 1950/51, pushing them entirely out of DPRK territory, the war no longer carried the risk that US forces might advance to the Soviet border. Stalin therefore calculated that if Moscow continued to supply war materiel and protect Yalu River bridges, the Chinese and North Koreans could keep the American military bogged down in Korea for two to three years. With the Americans thus unable to attack the USSR from the West, the Soviet Union would have time to rebuild its own forces and those of its client states in Eastern Europe to prepare for the expected future confrontation. As Stalin explained to the East European military and political leaders he summoned to Moscow in mid-January 1951,

> the three years at our disposal are not for sleeping, but for arming, and arming well…This is necessary in view of the imperialists’ way of thinking: they are in the habit of attacking unarmed or weakly armed countries to liquidate them, but they keep away from well-armed countries. This is why you need to arm during this respite, and arm well, in order that the imperialists respect you and keep away from you.\(^7\)

Stalin thus intended to prolong the war in Korea for two to three years in order to exploit the advantages it brought the Communist camp. Accordingly, as the armistice talks were set to resume in November 1951, he informed Mao that the Soviet leadership “considers it correct that the Chinese/Korean side, using flexible tactics… continue to pursue a hard line, not showing haste and not displaying interest in a rapid end to the negotiations.”\(^8\) Since Mao had his own reasons for regarding the war as beneficial, the Chinese and North


\(^6\) For a historiographical discussion of this aspect of the war, see Kenneth P. Werrell, “Airpower,” in James I. Matray and Donald W. Boose, Jr., The Ashgate Research Companion to the Korean War (Ashgate, 2014): 135-147.


\(^8\) Politburo decision of 19 November 1951, approving the attached answer to Comrade Mao Zedong, APRF, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 828[9], Listy 42-43, and AVPRF, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Papka 11, Delo 5, List 64. For the text of
Korean negotiators held to this “hard line” until Stalin’s death in March 1953, even at the cost of the near-complete destruction of the DPRK from relentless US bombing.\(^9\)

Zubok and Pechatnov’s article provides a valuable perspective on the fluidity of the situation created by the Inchon landing of 15 September 1950. With North Korea facing imminent defeat, Stalin did not know whether the Chinese would honor their prewar commitment to intervene or, indeed, whether such intervention would succeed. He was therefore willing for a few weeks to allow talks in New York with Lancaster, Pickett, and the other Americans. Once the situation on the ground changed in his favor, however, the Soviet leader was, predictably, no longer interested in such initiatives. It is striking how little account the amateur diplomats took of the conditions on the ground in Korea. In the context of the course of the war outlined above, it is difficult to imagine what a private diplomatic initiative by Americans could have accomplished.

**Kathryn Weathersby** is Adjunct Professor of Asian Studies at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service of Georgetown University. Her research has focused on Soviet involvement in Korea before and during the Korean War, and the history of the DPRK. She founded the North Korea International Documentation Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, and co-founded the Korean War Archive at Korea University in Seoul.

---