More than 63 years after it began on June 25, 1950, the Korean War has not yet formally ended. Since the Allies' jointly imposed decision at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945 to divide Korea at the 38th parallel, Koreans have unsuccessfully tried to unify the country. It was one such attempt, initiated by the North that became the immediate cause of the war. Thanks to previously unpublished primary sources, we now know more about the beginning of the Korean War than we have at any point, yet a number of interesting and important questions are still unanswered. In the context of the post-Cold War era, perhaps the most intriguing question about the start of the Korean War remains: why did Stalin decide to approve the invasion of South Korea in June 1950? This paper will explore the combination of factors that influenced Stalin's decision to support the invasion and explain the considerations that were most important for him. Among his considerations were potential American reactions to an attack, the role of China in an invasion, and North Korea's military strength vis-à-vis South Korea.

In the years immediately following the invasion of South Korea, analysts of the war reached different conclusions about how and why it began. Earlier accounts by American scholars agreed with the interpretation of the Truman administration that the invasion was part of a “Soviet war plan.” Historian David Dallin, who had a deep background in Russia, contended that it was “planned, prepared, and initiated” by Joseph Stalin. Other, more recent scholars, such as Bruce Cumings, have considered the possibility that Kim Il-Sung did not gain Stalin’s approval for the attack at all. When analyzing Stalin’s role...
in the attack, one must first understand the nature of his relationship with Kim Il-Sung in the years (and months) leading up to the start of the Korean War, as well as his views of the post-World War II order and Korea's place in it.

The USSR & Korea after World War II
One of the best resources for understanding the relationship between Stalin and Kim Il-Sung is a collection of Soviet documents that were made publicly available after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In June 1994, President Kim Young-Sam of South Korea visited Russian President Boris Yeltsin in Moscow. During their meeting, Yeltsin presented, from Russian archives, two hundred and sixteen previously classified Soviet documents on the Korean War. The collection contains high-level documents from 1949 to 1953, totaling five hundred and forty eight pages. One particularly revealing document from the collection contains the minutes of a March 5, 1949, meeting between Stalin and Kim Il-Sung.

That meeting took place at the Moscow Kremlin after Kim and his delegation had traveled there by train from Pyongyang. The North Korean leader had come to Moscow to secure greater economic and cultural assistance from the USSR for his newly established DPRK. Stalin spoke to Kim as his patron, asking Kim directly how much assistance he required. The document shows a North Korean leader who was completely dependent economically on the Soviet Union. It is also worth noting that because very few Koreans had been permitted to receive higher education or gain management experience under Japanese colonial rule, North Korea was dependent on the Soviet Union for technical expertise as well as economic assistance.

If we accept the view put forward by earlier scholars that the invasion of South Korea was a long-premeditated part of a grand Soviet war plan, then we should expect to find evidence from before 1949 that shows high-ranking Soviet officials planning to take control of the Korean peninsula. On the contrary, the documentary evidence from the CPSU and Russian Foreign Ministry archives indicates that from February 1945 until January 1950 Stalin's intention in Korea was simply to maintain the balance of power. While his goals for Europe were expansionist, Stalin's post-war policies toward Korea were considerably less so, balancing Soviet strategy against US interests. Other than attaining the southern Kuriles from Japan at the end of World War II, Stalin sought only a return to Russia's 1905 position in the Far East, and at the Yalta Conference in early February 1945 he made no demands at all with respect to Korea.

The CPSU and Soviet Foreign Ministry documents written in the 1940s do not indicate policy debates of any kind, and for that reason it is reasonable to conclude that reports circulated in the Foreign Ministry reflected opinions and recommendations directly from the top. One reference paper on Korea, written by two Soviet Foreign Ministry officials in the Second Far Eastern Department responsible for Korea in June 1945 clearly indicates Soviet thinking about Korea in the months following the Yalta conference. The paper was written as background for future negotiators at the Potsdam Conference, and gives an extensive history of the power competition over Korea for about one hundred years prior to 1945.

The authors of this short report list five Soviet conclusions bearing on the resolution of the Korean question. First, the Russian struggle against Japanese expansion through Korea in 1904-1905 was justified, however, at the time Russia lacked the strength to prevent the Japanese colonization of Korea (in large part because Japan had the support of England, Germany and the United States). Second, Japan must always be excluded from Korea because a Korea ruled by Japan would again be a continuous threat to the eastern USSR. Third, Korea must not be turned into a staging ground for future aggression against the USSR by any power, and therefore any future Korean government must be friendly to the USSR. Fourth, the resolution of the Korean question may prove difficult because of conflicting interests in Korea and because the US and/or China may try to compensate Japan for its war losses by recognizing Japanese economic interest in Korea. Last, if a UN trusteeship is established, the Soviet Union must have a prominent role in it. This report helps to reveal the true nature of the Soviet government's aims in Korea following World War II. The USSR's intention was to keep Japan out of Korea and to ensure that Korea would never be hostile to the Soviet Union.
On August 14, 1945, at Potsdam, Stalin approved the US proposal to divide Korea at the 38th parallel without discussion. Earlier, he had directed Soviet soldiers to stop at the 38th parallel, even though US forces did not reach South Korea until weeks later in September 1945. Foreign Ministry archive documents from September 1945 indicate that the Soviet government did not have a plan for the ultimate political settlement of Korea at that time, although it thought that a United Nations trusteeship could potentially counter American gains in the Pacific. The Soviet Union also did not support activities of the communist party in South Korea, or directly engage in any agitation propaganda in the American zone in the years after World War II. It is therefore fairly clear that the Soviet Union did not have a strategic plan to take control of the entire Korean peninsula following World War II.

Why did Stalin change his mind in 1950?
The documentary record currently available indicates that in January 1950 a combination of factors led Stalin to change his mind regarding Kim Il-Sung's proposed invasion of South Korea. Although we cannot yet definitively answer the question of which factors were most important in his decision-making, the evidence suggests that several considerations took precedence. First, Stalin believed that the United States most likely would not intervene to defend South Korea. At the same time, the Soviet relationship with the PRC was such that if the US did intervene, there could be substantial benefits for the Soviet Union anyways.

By June 1949, American forces had been almost entirely withdrawn from Korea. The Soviet Union performed its first nuclear test, codenamed RDS-1, on August 29, 1949. On September 3, 1949, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Vyshinsky received a telegram from Terenty Shtykov, the Soviet ambassador to North Korea. The telegram reveals that once again Kim had requested Stalin's permission to attack the South, this time claiming that the South Korean military was preparing an attack on the DPRK. Kim's petition was that he be enabled to make a more or less equivalent counterattack, although he added that it would not be difficult to take control of the entire peninsula “if the international situation permits,” which was surely a reference to possible American reactions or non-reactions. A September 11 telegram from then-Deputy Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang suggested that, by that time, Stalin had begun to warm up to the idea of assisting North Korea in a military campaign, although he hadn’t yet approved Kim's request. Another telegram, this one sent to Moscow from the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Pyongyang on September 14 declared Kim’s attack plan not yet advisable. All of these documents provide indirect indications that Soviet calculations of potential US involvement were always important in Soviet considerations about Kim’s requests for a military campaign against the South.

On January 12, 1950, Stalin received a clear indication that the United States would not intervene in a Korean war when US Secretary of State Dean Acheson allowed that Korea was outside the American defense perimeter in the Pacific in his speech before the National Press Club. Stalin finally gave his approval to Kim's request in late January 1950. The timing of Stalin's approval supports the conclusion that US policy toward Korea played a significant role in Stalin's decision. When viewed in combination with the record of his actions in June 1950, Soviet documents suggest that Stalin would not have approved North Korea's attack if the US had clearly indicated that it would defend South Korea. Perhaps the Soviets' new position as a nuclear power, combined with Acheson's statement and an assumption that the US cared
more about Europe, led Stalin to think the US was unlikely to redeploy troops to Korea. The Communist victory in China and the February 14, 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance also likely played a substantial role in Stalin’s decision to approve the invasion. Since the end of World War II, the Soviets had been in principle supportive of the unification of Korea under DPRK control. The main issue was whether or not an attempt to reunify Korea by force would bring broadly favorable results. Stalin’s denials of Kim’s requests for invasion plans were for that reason always conditional, and issued on the basis of disadvantageous timing. But following the PLA’s successful military campaign in China (in which the US had failed to intervene decisively), Kim became considerably more eager to end the ongoing division of Korea. The idea that the PLA could achieve victory in China while Korea was forced to remain divided became intolerable to Kim, and he began to push for a Communist liberation of South Korea with greater and greater urgency.

Furthermore, establishment of the PRC in China meant that the Chinese military would finally be able to offer substantial support to the North Korean cause. During the Chinese civil war, the North Korean government supported communists in Manchuria with both manpower and materiel. After the establishment of the PRC, between fifty thousand and seventy thousand Korean PLA veterans returned to North Korea, with their weapons. In May 1949, Mao personally promised Kim that he would help the Koreans once the fighting in China ended. Referring to that promise, Kim ardently appealed to Soviet ambassador Shtykov to let him visit Moscow so that he could convince Stalin to approve an attack on the South. Shtykov reported that conversation to Moscow in a telegram to Foreign Minister Vyshinsky on January 19, 1950. According to Shtykov, “Kim… in an excited manner began to speak about how now, when China is completing its liberation, the liberation of the Korean people in the South of the country is next in line.” For Kim, there was no reason to delay the inevitable reunification of Korea under his leadership.

Stalin also understood that a war in Korea would bring the PRC closer to the USSR, and probably even more importantly, keep the PRC diplomatically distant from the United States. Before the real planning for the attack began, Stalin pressed Kim to secure Mao’s approval as well, saying that Kim could “only get down to action after consulting with Comrade Mao Tse-Tung personally.” Mao nervously deferred the matter back to Stalin, who then replied; “the question should ultimately be decided by the Chinese and Korean comrades together,” thus protecting his role while avoiding responsibility. With confirmation that Chinese soldiers would be sent to reinforce the North Koreans if necessary, an attack plan could be arranged that would pose minimal risk to the Soviet Union.

Foreseeing that America would send soldiers to Taiwan in the event of Chinese troops moving into Korea, Stalin must have recognized that Mao would then require Soviet support in case of a renewed civil war in China. For Stalin, there would be no downside to Chinese participation in the Korean War so long as the USSR, PRC, and DPRK were all working together and the war did not spread. Despite the fact that the record of Soviet deliberation on the Korean question is still fragmented, it seems that the practical basis for planning the attack in the months and weeks prior to June 25, 1950, was that military victory would be achieved swiftly and decisively. Soviet and North Korean military planners believed that the North’s
advantage was then at its highest point and the DPRK could quickly defeat Southern forces. Because both sides constantly feared attack from the other side, Stalin decided that the North should attack while it had the upper hand. Following Kim Il-Sung and Pak Hon-Yong’s April 1950 visit to Moscow, Stalin sent to Pyongyang a new group of military advisors, experienced in World War II, along with massive shipments of weapons and supplies.

Analyzing Stalin’s reasoning in approving the June 1950 attack on South Korea is of course fascinating for historians of the Cold War, but questions about how and why the Korean War began are relevant today as well, when one seeks to predict future international conflicts in and around Eurasia. The start of the Korean War shows us that situations can arise, in which self-interested, non-empathetic leaders may find that helping to start a foreign war provides opportunities without attached risks. Contemporaries in the West may have seen Stalin as unpredictable or wildly aggressive, but as this paper has shown, while he did not have a definite long-term plan, his foreign policy decisions with respect to Korea were cautious, calculating, and opportunistic.

With another autocratic and cautiously opportunistic provocateur sitting in the Moscow Kremlin today, analysts and policymakers should make a serious effort to see the world, and assess his interests, from his point of view. Much has changed since Putin came to power in 2000, but throughout his time in office, he has been engaged in the same grand project – restoring Russia to the position of global greatness he believes it is entitled to. Since he returned to the presidency in 2012, Putin’s top priorities for remaking Russia into a great power have been (1) to prevent the expansion of NATO, (2) to forge a Eurasian Economic Union that can compete with the EU, and (3) to check American power and support autocratic governments that the U.S. would seek to change. Though most American policymakers might not consider this the best list for turning Russia into a great power, in Putin’s mind it is the path to success.

With that list in mind, it is not so hard to see why events have unfolded as they have in Ukraine over the last year. The Euro-maidan protest turned revolution threatened all of Putin’s top priorities. Without Russian action, a new Western oriented government in Kiev could potentially join NATO and the EU and enhance American power in the region. Doing his best to prevent Ukraine’s westward turn and Europe’s expansion to the East, Putin has clearly maintained these priorities. From a Western perspective, it is easy to say that today’s Russian leader is flouting international norms and behaving like an imperialist from the last century, but in order to predict how Russia will act toward its neighbors going forward, one must weigh the potential costs and benefits of every action from the perspective of a ruler who, while surely lacking in empathy, is not carelessly aggressive or intent on world domination.

Soviet Foreign Ministry and CPSU archives opened in 1993, as demonstrated above, have given Western scholars of the last twenty years greater insight into the formulation of Soviet policy than anyone who was writing before 1993 could have had support for. Documents already referred to in this paper show that the June 25 attack did not originate from a larger Soviet War plan, but rather from Kim Il-Sung. Although the USSR provided material aid to both the North Korean and Chinese armies before and during the war, the initial invasion was proposed and carried out by Kim Il-Sung and his DPRK forces. Documents referred to in this paper also disprove the other main revisionist argument about the invasion: that North Korea’s ties to the USSR were minimal and that it acted on its own. The available evidence clearly shows that Kim Il-Sung had the standing to propose and advocate for his plan of attack, but at the same time did not possess great enough political and economic autonomy to attack South Korea without
Stalin’s approval.

There is, however, another plausible and interesting theory about Stalin’s approval of the invasion. The theory relies on an August 27, 1950 telegram from Stalin to Czechoslovak president Klement Gottwald. After the North Korean invasion in June, the United States proposed and received UN Security Council approval to intervene in the conflict, something it was able to do because the Soviet Permanent Representative was absent during the vote, and thereby was unable to veto the Security Council resolution. Like other Eastern European leaders, Gottwald did not understand Stalin’s decision to avoid the vote. Unlike others, he was bold enough to send Stalin a letter asking why the USSR had not participated. The August 27 telegram is Stalin’s response to Gottwald.

In this document, Stalin defends his decision by offering an explanation. He claims there were four reasons why the Soviet Union left the Security Council. First, he wanted to show solidarity with the new China, which the other wartime allies refused to recognize. Second, he sought to highlight the absurdity of the United States policy of recognizing nationalist China in the United Nations Security Council as the official representative of China. Third, he wanted to make Security Council decisions illegitimate by having two great powers absent; and fourth, he intended “to give the American government a free hand and give it an opportunity to commit more foolishness using a majority in the Security Council so that public opinion can see the true face of the American government.”

It is this last point that forms the basis for Beijing University Professor Donggil Kim’s alternate theory of Stalin’s decision. In short, Professor Kim argues that Stalin’s letter to Gottwald shows that he gave permission to Kim Il-Sung to attack South Korea precisely because he wanted the United States to become entangled in an East Asian conflict, not because he thought the US would not intervene. In Professor Kim’s words, “Stalin hoped for the United States to become entangled in a military conflict in Korea, and expected that UN sanctions would better facilitate United States entry into the Korean War.” This is an intriguing theory that deserves consideration. It has the notable virtue of explaining Stalin’s decision not to participate in the Security Council vote after the attack, whereas the opposite interpretation seems to imply that the Soviet Union’s absence during the vote was an inexplicable mistake.

Regarding that same letter to Gottwald, William Stueck adheres to the view that Stalin did not want US intervention and says simply, “Why the Soviet Union did not return to the Security Council to prevent this remains uncertain.” In fact, what remains uncertain is why Professor Kim’s and Stueck’s respective assessments of Stalin’s decision-making must remain mutually exclusive. Taking into consideration all of the available evidence, there is no reason to doubt the first three reasons Stalin gave Gottwald for leaving the Security Council. Only his fourth reason seems to be an ex post facto attempt to justify a decision that had not gone according to the original plan. According to the evidence, by 1950 Stalin had developed a strategy in Korea, which included a backup plan, or at least an excuse.

As the correspondence between the Soviet Union and the DPRK from 1949 to 1950 indicates, Stalin believed that the US was unlikely to intervene militarily in June 1950, and he preferred a quick North Korean victory with no US intervention. Stalin did recognize, however, that there was still a risk of US intervention, and he saw the guarantee of Chinese involvement as a counterbalance in such an occurrence.

There were, as William Stueck notes, other possible reasons why the Soviet Union did not return to the Security Council after the attack. For example, “Stalin may have feared such action would increase the danger of a direct military confrontation with the United States; or… [he] may have wanted to demonstrate that the international organization was toothless even without a Soviet presence.” Andrei Gromyko advised Stalin not to boycott the session and claimed in his memoirs, “Stalin was for once guided by emotion.” At the same time, Stalin probably believed that US involvement in a Korean conflict was acceptable for the Soviet Union. Understanding that if the US defended the South, he would not pay a high price, Sino-US relations would deteriorate, and China’s dependence on the USSR would be reinforced, an America overextended in East Asia and less able to react quickly to future events in Europe was for Stalin an acceptable outcome of the attack, even if Korea was not quickly unified under the North.