International History Declassified - Charles Kraus

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**SPEAKERS**

Introduction, Kian Byrne, Charles Kraus, Pieter Biersteker

**Introduction**

Welcome to International History Declassified, the podcast that provides an insider's view of the history of the post-war world and the historians who study it. International History Declassified is a production of the History and Public Policy Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

**Pieter Biersteker**

Hello, and thanks for joining us. I'm your host, Pieter Biersteker…

**Kian Byrne**

And I'm your co-host, Kian Byrne.

**Pieter Biersteker**

The Wilson Center's History and Public Policy Program uses archival sources and history to improve understanding of important global dynamics, trends in international relations, and US foreign policy. The program is home to the Digital Archive — a free online resource of newly-declassified materials from around the world. The archive is accessible at [www.DigitalArchive.org](http://www.DigitalArchive.org).

**Kian Byrne**

In our first three episodes, we'll be speaking with three historians about the Korean War, which began 70 years ago this month. Neither Pieter nor I are experts on this topic, but by speaking with experts and examining their sources and methods, we'll explore the most recent research being done in the field while providing the context, significance, and current debate on events.

**Pieter Biersteker**

Today, we're going to be speaking with Charles Kraus, Deputy Director of the History and Public Policy Program here at the Wilson Center. Charles heads the Program's efforts on the history of China's foreign relations, so we're delighted to have the opportunity to speak with him today about China's role in the Korean War. Welcome, Chuck.

**Charles Kraus**

Thanks for having me.

**Pieter Biersteker**

I'm going to jump right into the questions, if that's all right with you. So, because much of your research has been on modern Chinese history, we'd like to begin with what was happening domestically in China at the time. Can you tell us what impact China's civil war had on the leadup and outbreak of the Korean War?

**Charles Kraus**

Oh, sure. So, China was in the midst of a civil war that began shortly after the end of World War Two, fought between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party. And this had– the Chinese Civil War had an effect on what was going on in Korea, and specifically with North Korea, in a couple of different ways. At sort of a general level, the fact that the Communist Party of China was fighting against its rivals, who were perceived as being, you know, close to the Americans, or capitalist, certainly had an impact and an influence on North Korean leaders who, as we know, wanted to do something similar in regards to their rivals in South Korea. So, for North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung, looking next door and seeing that Mao Zedong and the Communist Party were fighting this revolutionary war, and at a certain point, in 1948–1949, were clearly on the path to victory, that must have inspired Kim Il-Sung to want to do the same thing in his own country. But then there was also, sort of at a more practical level, the fact that the Chinese Communist Party was busy fighting its own civil war did have– did put limits on the extent of the ties that they had with North Korea at that time, so unlike the Soviet Union, the Chinese Communist Party had somewhat limited ties to North Korea up to 1949, you know, the Communist Party didn't have an ambassador in Pyongyang or anything like that. The North Koreans didn't have anyone permanently stationed, you know, in Beijing to sort of liaise with the Communist Party, so it does mean there were some limits on the connectivity between the two sides during this period.

**Pieter Biersteker**

Great, thank you so much. So one of the themes you've brought up previously in your work is: how much did Mao know in the leadup to the Korean War? Could you explain why this is such an important question and what you've discovered in your research?

**Charles Kraus**

Yeah. So, I mean, the— what did Mao know about Kim Il-Sung’s war plans and Kim Il-Sung’s desires to reunify the Korean Peninsula under his control is important for a couple of reasons. One, it gets us to the question of, you know, why did the Korean War begin, and, sort of, what was the, you know, the international context there; who initiated the war, and why? So understanding Kim Il-Sung’s relationships with China and with the Soviet Union can help us figure out why, you know, why Kim Il-Sung eventually did launch the war.

Another, you know, related reason why that's an important question is– This gets us to sort of what happens after the war begins and subsequent developments in China's relations with North Korea and the Soviet Union. Obviously, if Mao didn't know that Kim Il-Sung was about to launch a war, the war eventually drew in China, cost countless Chinese lives, that would have a different impact on China's relations with North Korea, as well as the Soviet Union. And if, you know, Mao was fully aware of what Kim was planning, based on the evidence that we have, Mao was definitely aware of Kim Il-Sung’s desires to launch a war as early as the spring of 1949. Kim Il-Sung himself didn't go to China, but he did send a representative to China to talk with Mao as well as other key members of the Communist Party, and during these meetings, which, by the way, we really only know about because of the Soviet archives, we don't— There's no real evidence of these meetings taking place in Chinese or North Korean sources, but based on the Soviet archives, we know that Kim Il-Sung sent someone to China to talk with Mao, and Kim Il-Sung’s representative basically put it out there that Kim Il-Sung also desired to have a war of liberation against South Korea and reunify the peninsula under his command.

And how did Mao respond at this particular time? Well, if you look at the documents, you get two different impressions, and that's because of who was writing the documents. On— for one source, which was written by the Soviet ambassador to North Korea, so it must have been composed after Kim Il-Sung’s representative gets back to North Korea and debriefs the Soviet ambassador, you get the impression that Mao was fully supportive of Kim Il-Sung’s war plans. But if you read another source, which was written by the Soviet representative in China, which must have been based off of Mao's debriefings, or someone else in the Communist Party leadership's debriefings with this individual, you get a different impression, which is, Mao said, “Now is not the right time for war. China is still in the midst of its own civil war. That means we're not going to be able to support you if you need our help.” And then there's other pieces of evidence, as time goes on, that Mao is aware of and not fully comfortable with Kim Il-Sung’s war plans. Later in the year, again thanks to the Soviet archives, we know that Mao wrote to Stalin to say he's gathered intelligence or he's learned through intelligence that Kim Il-Sung wanted to launch an invasion of South Korea, that he had sent partisans to South Korea, and Mao was upset because, one, this was the exact opposite of what he had told him earlier that year, but two, he believed that Kim Il-Sung had made some strategic errors that now put him at a disadvantage. And these sorts of, you know, other cables like this exist from 1949 to 1950 that show Mao was clearly aware of Kim Il-Sung’s aspirations.

And then the real sort of turning point is later in spring of 1950, when Kim Il-Sung actually himself goes to China. He goes to China in May 1950, after having just been in the Soviet Union in April 1950. And we know that when Kim Il-Sung went to the Soviet Union in April, it's at that time that he actually gained Stalin's approval to launch a war. He had been asking Stalin for several years, and every time Stalin had basically dismissed the idea, but in April 1950, Stalin says, “Okay, but you need to go to China to consult with Mao.” So Kim Il-Sung goes to China, he consults with Mao, he tells him that he has gained approval from Stalin to launch a war and he wants to know what Mao thinks. So on May 13, Mao writes to Stalin to say, “Hey, Kim Il-Sung says you've given the okay for a war. Is that true?” And Stalin writes back the next day and says, “It is true. The situation has changed to such an extent that a war on the Korean Peninsula is now permissible. But,” Stalin says, “But only if you, Mao, approve of Kim's plans.” After that the paper trail sort of dries up. But because of what happened on June 25, we know that Mao must have given his consent to Kim Il-Sung launching the war.

**Kian Byrne**

Can you go into a little more detail about the Stalin-Mao relationship and how that played into the green light for Kim to move forward with the invasion?

**Charles Kraus**

Well, I mean, to be completely honest, so, prior to the start of the Korean War, there's just not a lot of evidence out there about, sort of, the interactions that Mao had with Kim Il-Sung. You know, like I said earlier, really the only sources we have about what was going on between the two countries at sort of that high level between the two top leaders comes from the Soviet archives. You know, the Chinese have never released any of the records of Mao's meetings with Kim Il-Sung from prior to the Korean War, even in sort of the official biographies that Party historians in China, many of whom have, you know, very privileged access to archives and sources, they don't even mention that this meeting took place. So, you know, there's limits on what we can know about the relationship. On the one hand, though, we do see some evidence of, you know, occasional annoyance on Mao's part with Kim Il-Sung. I referenced earlier, Mao sent a document— a report to Stalin, a cable to Stalin where he said, you know, “I'm upset that I learned that Kim Il-Sung was trying to start this war in South Korea. That's not what I recommended they do; they're not listening to me.” So you do see, sort of, examples of…you could call it tension, annoyance. But on the other hand, I don't— I think there's a flip side, which is, Kim Il-Sung wanted to replicate what Mao had done in China, which was, you know, waging a civil war, emerging victorious, and then being able to carry forward with the communist revolution. And I think Mao must have appreciated that this person, Kim Il-Sung, wanted to replicate, you know, his successes. So I don't think you should— that's not something you necessarily see verbatim in the documents. But I do think that was a part of it. Because you do see that Kim Il-Sung was very pleased with the outcome of the civil war in China, and that he saw this, as you know, now that China has finished its war and won, now it's my turn.

**Kian Byrne**

So, you say most of the high-level materials we have come from the Soviet side, but what about the Chinese records? What types of sources are available there? And what can they tell us about the Chinese perspective of the war?

**Charles Kraus**

Yeah, I mean, if you're talking about sort of the period of the Chinese Civil War, there is, there is evidence, archival evidence of some interactions between regional Chinese officials, so not Mao or anyone at that level, but sort of the provincial officials in northeast China, you know, the part of China that borders North Korea. There is evidence of interactions between the two sides, and it’s interesting, and it does show, you know, connectivity between the Chinese Communist Party and the, you know, the emerging North Korean state. It also— there's evidence that North Korea actually provided some level of assistance to the Chinese Communist forces fighting in the civil war in northeast China, for example, by letting Chinese Communist forces cross the border to evade detection or to retreat to safety against the national— Chinese Nationalist Army. So there are— there is Chinese sources on that sort of, at that level. At sort of the higher level of, you know, once the new Chinese— you know, People's Republic of China, is founded in October 1949, in its interactions with North Korea at that point, on the one hand, you sort of see it becoming a more normal relationship. I mean, there's a lot of Chinese sources that, you know, China sent such-and-such delegation to participate in a conference in North Korea, or North Korea asked to buy, you know, coal from China. Actually, one of the really important things that there is some Chinese evidence on, which does factor into the origins of the Korean War, is that China, you know, it's a big country, there's a lot of different ethnic groups in China, including a large, fairly large Korean minority group. And during the Chinese Civil War, there was several ethnically Korean contingents in the Chinese Communist Army. And Mao Zedong, in 1949, volunteers that these soldiers, if they want, they could go to North Korea and they could join the Korean People's Army. So this was sort of a way, although at that point Mao didn't consent to a war, he did find ways to support North Korea and support its armed forces. So Mao made that offer in 1949, but it doesn't actually happen until early 1950, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, that these troops are transferred from China, from the People's Liberation Army, to the Korean People's Army, and you do have Chinese evidence on that specific issue, but when it comes to the, you know, Mao's meetings with Kim Il-Sung, there just— there's not public Chinese evidence on those.

**Kian Byrne**

That's interesting. So how has the Chinese-North Korean relationship developed since the war and what role does the war have in the Chinese national memory today?

**Charles Kraus**

Yeah, it's definitely fair to say that the war rapidly accelerated, you know, the relationship between China and North Korea. And it also, you know, up, you know, the Soviet Union had occupied North Korea after World War Two, up to the founding of the North Korean state in 1948. And it's fair to say that the Soviet Union, prior to the Korean War, was North Korea's most important ally. But the Korean War does change that, and it really sort of puts China on an even footing with the Soviet Union vis-à-vis North Korea. So it really does shift North Korea's overall, you know, diplomatic relat— foreign relations, in terms of, you know, how this relationship is viewed, or how the war is viewed today…on the one hand, I think, if you look at, for many years, sort of, China— the level of discourse about the Korean War was pretty limited. And it basically subscribed to the same view that North Korea had, which was in fact that North Korea didn't start the war, but this was a war started by the United States, and that North Korea, you know, was defending itself. That's changed a lot from the 1980s to today. Most Chinese historians recognize the, sort of, the complexity of the war in that it was, in fact, a, you know, a North Korean initiative that took place with the blessing of Stalin as well as Mao. I think at sort of the— in how it affects China's relations with North Korea today, you can sort of look at it two ways. One is that— one is that, well, sorry, to back up, in terms of sort of popular memory, the war is also— for China, the Korean War is also very important because this is an example of China fighting against the United States and maybe not emerging victorious, but they did effectively come out with a draw, so they didn't lose. And if you put that— if you think about that in perspective, when China intervened in the Korean War, it had been a state for less than one year, or about one year. It was a poor country. It had just fought its own civil war for, you know, four or five years. And then the fact that they're sending troops into a foreign country to fight the United States, which, at that time, you know, the most powerful country in the world, I mean, that— I think that's a powerful thing for Chinese audiences.

But then there is the, sort of the flip side, which is, hundreds of thousands of Chinese people died fighting this war or were seriously injured. That means it affected even, you know, millions of family members in China. So there's sort of a— I mean, it was it was a bloody, messy conflict for China. It also prevented China from doing a lot of things that it wanted to do, one of which was to, whatever you want to call it, invade, liberate, you know, take over Taiwan, which, to this day, the People's Republic of China has never been able to do, and a big reason for that is because the Korean War got in the way. So that's sort of one of the negative legacies, or those are some of the negative legacies that China has from this war. And, you know, in terms of sort of thinking about the place of the war in the relationship between China and North Korea today, I mean, on the one hand, this is— it's something that's often raised in sort of these official commemorations or official dialogues between the two countries that, you know, that these— they were sort of bonded in blood as a result of this conflict, and, you know, they often will pay respect to the dead from both sides, you know, dead soldiers from both sides. So it sort of is a— still is an important unifying device. But I think it also does sort of feed into the debates today about, you know, should China continue to support North Korea, or should China continue— or should China effectively abandon North Korea? You know, what does China gain from effectively propping up the DPRK today? And I do think, I'm not saying it's the foremost calculation on the part of the Chinese government, but I do think it does come up. If China were to say “We're giving up on North Korea, we will no longer support them,” I mean, then this goes back to the sort of— the costs that China bared as a result of the Korean War, which was you know, nearly a million soldiers dead and an unresolved— from mainland China's perspective, an unresolved civil war of its own with regards to Taiwan.

**Kian Byrne**

So, moving back to the documents, what is research on the war like in China? Is most of the work being done by Chinese scholars using Chinese sources?

**Charles Kraus**

So I think, just as in the United States in the early 1990s, when the Soviet archives opened up and a lot of the documents that came out at that time really transformed how scholars in the United States understood the Korean War, I think the same is very true with scholars in China. So if you read the, like, the footnotes of any serious book written in Chinese about the Korean War, most of the sources they're citing are actually Soviet documents. So that's true here in the United States, and that's also true in China. I think the, sort of the— where Chinese can fill in the gaps is, at least they previously could, it's— now that we're 70 years from the Korean War, this is more challenging. They could fill in the gaps through interviews with Chinese officials who had been involved in, sort of, the deliberations, or involved in the Korean War. And then there's a few Chinese scholars who do have privileged access to the Communist Party Central Archives in Beijing, and they have gained some important insights from those archives. But that's something, you know, like I said, you have to be sort of a privileged, reliable historian who has some affiliation with the Communist Party to get those documents. And I don't even know if that's true today. That may have been true in the 1990s and early 2000s, but things in China have changed so dramatically, I don't know that, you know, who, or if anyone, is able to access those types of documents. But there have been some interesting revelations from Chinese archives on— those types of Chinese archives that have been highlighted in, among other places, the Cold War international History Project Bulletin.

For example, there was sort of a key document that — it was believed to be a key document — that a Chinese scholar had discovered in the Chinese archives written from Mao to Stalin right before, right as China was deliberating whether it should send troops to North Korea and enter the war, that sort of painted Mao's thinking in one light. And people believe that this really changed what we knew about Mao's, you know, strategic decision-making. But then, actually, if you went to the Soviet archives and looked for the copy of this telegram, it wasn't there, and in fact, you found something that was quite different, because what scholars in China had found was, we believe, sort of a draft telegram that was never actually sent to Stalin. So, you know, it's, that's another thing, this— having sort of access to both sides, you know, the archives from China from the former Soviet Union, can be very important because it helps you see, you know, what was such an urgent thing from the Chinese perspective, or from the Soviet side, that they wanted to share this with their allies in, you know, in Beijing or Moscow. But overall, we don't have that level of sort of access on both sides, you know, it's much more weighted to the Russian documents than it is the Chinese, at least with regards to the question of the origins of the Korean War.

**Pieter Biersteker**

As always, you can get in touch with us by emailing ColdWar@wilsoncenter.org. We'd like to thank Graham Norwood for this podcast's music.

**Introduction**

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