

Trotskyism vs. the ‘Third Camp’ Korea: the Forgotten War

The Korean War, which raged between 1950 and 1953, left over three million dead and a country divided. Many of the dead were victims of the massive, deliberate terror bombing of civilians by the forces of “Western Civilization,” under the flag of the United Nations. The war, which very nearly resulted in the second nuclear attack by the United States on an Asian nation, continues to echo in Korean politics today. Yet it is now remembered in the U.S. primarily as the backdrop for the sexual adventures and cynical witticisms of “Hawkeye” Pierce and his buddies in the anti-militarist 1970s American television series, *M*A*S*H*. Even most leftists know far less about the Korean “police action” than its Vietnamese sequel.

The Korean conflict illustrated how Washington’s Cold War strategy of “containing” and “rolling back” Communism meant intervening abroad to crush social revolution and national liberation struggles. Today, as liberals and various self-proclaimed leftists call for greater UN military involvement in world affairs, it is appropriate to recall that the United Nations’ first major military campaign was an attempt to strangle the Korean revolution. The Korean War also provided a test of the political character of the various supposedly Marxist currents of the early 1950s. Coming as it did a little over a year after Mao Zedong’s armies crushed the remnants of Chiang Kai Shek’s forces, the conflict in Korea appeared to many as the latest in the inexorable march of Moscow-inspired Communism. The various tendencies on the left reacted to this phenomenon in very different ways.

Most studies of the origins of the Korean War focus on the fundamentally uninteresting question of whose troops crossed the 38th parallel, the border between the Koreas, first on the morning of 25 June 1945 (the official start of the war). This focus is common to most Western historians, as well as the self-serving accounts inspired by both Korean regimes. This approach ignores the earlier massive social struggles in Korea, in which more than 100,000 people were killed or wounded, and which provides the only basis for understanding the partition of Korea and the subsequent civil war. New Left historian Bruce Cumings’ definitive two-volume work, *The Origins of the Korean War* (which was banned in South Korea) provides the most thorough and detailed examination of this history.

The international situation, primarily characterized by the U.S.-led global Cold War against Communism, provided the framework for the war. The intervention of the UN/imperialist forces on one side, and China on the other (with substantial material support from the USSR), determined the war’s outcome. But its roots were indigenous, and can be traced to the potentially revolutionary upheavals that followed the collapse of the Japanese Empire in 1945.

Until the beginning of this century, Korea was an essentially agrarian society, ruled by the Confucian Yi Dynasty, with the support of an elite of bureaucrat-landowners, the *Yangban* caste. As capitalism entered its imperialist stage, however, Korea, like the rest of the world, became an object of attention for rival Great Powers and the disruptive influ-

ence of world capitalism. When Japan defeated Czarist Russia in 1905, Korea came under its control. Five years later, it was officially annexed as the principal overseas colony of the Japanese Empire.

Korean society during the colonial period was a perfect example of what Leon Trotsky called “combined and uneven development.” The colonial regime instituted a land “registration” of *Yangban* and peasant holdings. Some land (mostly that of poor peasants) was lost when “undeclared” land became Japanese property. The purpose of the land registration was to allow the regime to extract more food from the Korean countryside. The Japanese allowed the indigenous elite to retain their land in return for their acceptance of and collaboration with colonial rule, while it forced many of the peasants off the land into the Imperial Army, or into the (mostly Japanese-owned) factories. Japanese concerns employed 1.3 million Koreans at the time of liberation in 1945. Hundreds of thousands of other Koreans relocated to Japan or Manchuria to find work.

During the forty years that Korea was occupied, the Stalinized Communist Party gained considerable support for its role in organizing strikes and anti-Japanese guerrilla operations. Japanese propaganda reinforced the popularity of the CP by attributing all anti-colonial activity to “Communist subversion.” The peasants longed to be free of their oppressive rents, and grew to despise the foreign overlords and their Korean *Yangban* collaborators. Capitalism, landlordism and foreign domination were inextricably mixed in colonial Korea.

With the Japanese defeat in 1945, the principal obstacle to social revolution was removed. The Korean elite was widely discredited by its decades of collaboration with the colonial government. The partial modernization carried out by the Japanese had destroyed the traditional society in which the *Yangban* had an organic role. A substantial section of the masses had become modern industrial workers, but, with a few individual exceptions, the members of the traditional elite had not transformed themselves into capitalists. On 9 August 1945, when the Japanese authorities handed over power to Yo Un Hyong, a bourgeois nationalist who formed the Provisional Committee for Korean Independence (PCKI), the situation in Seoul had many parallels with that in Moscow or Petrograd in February 1917. The PCKI was forced to rely on the leftist People’s Committees, which sprung up spontaneously from the political activity of workers and peasants. Under the banner of the *Chon Pyong* (the National Korean Labor Council), workers took control of industry across the peninsula. The *Chon Pyong* was predominantly under the influence of the Communist Party, but it also contained some social-democratic tendencies. According to Stewart Meacham, labor adviser to the American occupying forces, “virtually all of the larger factories” were taken over by workers’ unions (quoted in Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*). The *Chon Nong* (National Council of Korean Peasant Unions) was moving to dispossess the landlords. In short, the level of social struggle was comparable to that going on in Italy or Greece in the same period.

This was the situation that greeted the victorious Allied Powers. At Yalta, they had agreed that Korea would be administered under a joint trusteeship for a period of ten to thirty years. When the Soviet Army advanced into Korea after the USSR declared war on Japan on 8 August, the Americans quickly insisted that the Soviets not advance south of the 38th parallel (a line arbitrarily chosen by Dean Rusk, at the time a minor official in the U.S. War Department, in order to ensure that the American zone included Seoul). Stalin, anxious to preserve the wartime alliance, and relatively uninterested in Korea, immediately agreed, and Soviet forces withdrew to north of the line.

U.S. vs. Popular Movement

From the beginning, the Americans were chiefly concerned with halting the popular movement and suppressing what seemed to be an imminent social revolution. "General Order Number One," issued by General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of American Forces in the Pacific, commanded Koreans to obey Japanese authority until American troops arrived. When the Americans, under General John Hodge, did land at Inchon Bay on 8 September 1945, they refused to meet either with the PCKI or the People's Committees, which went ahead and proclaimed the establishment of a "Korean People's Republic" a week later. On 15 September, Merrell Benninghoff, chief political advisor to Hodge, reported that:

"Southern Korea can best be described as a powder keg ready to explode at the application of a spark.

"...[S]uch Koreans as have achieved high rank under the Japanese are considered pro-Japanese and are hated almost as much as their masters....

"All groups seem to have the common ideas of seizing Japanese property, ejecting the Japanese from Korea, and achieving immediate independence....Korea is completely ripe for agitators."

—Cumings, *op cit*.

However, all was not lost according to Benninghoff:

"The most encouraging single factor in the political situation is the presence in Seoul of several hundred conservatives among the older and better educated Koreans. Although many of them have served with the Japanese, that stigma ought eventually to disappear."

He proposed that these "democrats" ought to be given material support and encouragement by the occupiers. In a later report, he noted approvingly that this grouping, now organized as the Korean Democratic Party (KDP), "have stated that they realize that their country must pass through a period of tutelage, and that they would prefer to be under American rather than Soviet guidance" (*Ibid.*). Dr. Syngman Rhee, who had spent most of his adult life in the United States, was the ideal head of the KDP. The Americans assisted the fledgling regime by ensuring the cooperation of the Japanese-trained security forces. All Japanese laws continued in effect, subject only to the overriding authority of Mac-Arthur's military decrees. In December 1945, the Military Government officially banned the People's Committees. General Hodge admitted that, "'pro-American' had become an epithet akin to 'pro-Jap national traitor'" in the popular mind (quoted in S. Lone & G. McCormack, *Korea Since 1850*).

Not surprisingly, the Korean masses turned toward resistance. In the summer of 1946, the American occupiers initiated mass arrests of Communists and finally managed to suppress the People's Committees. Spontaneous resis-

tance was no match for the Japanese-trained and American-backed security forces. In all 200 police were killed, along with thousands of workers and peasants. Mark Gayn of the *Chicago Sun* described the struggle as "a full-scale revolution" and reported that, "hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people" were involved (*Ibid.*).

Unlike the Americans who suppressed the popular movement, the Soviets sought to incorporate it. Stalin ordered that "anti-Japanese groups and democratic parties and their activity should be aided." Of course, they were also to be controlled by the Kremlin oligarchs. In February 1946, the Soviets set up the Provisional People's Committee for North Korea, which was to co-ordinate the local committees in the Soviet zone. At the head of this organization, selected by Stalin himself, was a young Communist named Kim Il Sung. Although he had played a creditable role in the anti-Japanese resistance with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and as a captain in the Soviet Army, he was by no means the preeminent leader of Korean Communism, as he would later claim. His chief qualification was his apparently unquestioning loyalty to Stalin (see: G. McCormack, *New Left Review* No. 198). After assuming control, Kim quickly moved to arrest his foremost rival for popular support, the bourgeois nationalist Cho Man Sik (who was apparently later executed).

The regime set up by the Soviets was a bureaucratic workers' state closely modelled on the Soviet Union. While there was no element of direct political rule by the working class, it did carry out, in a bureaucratic, top-down manner, a social revolution. Women's legal equality was decreed for the first time in Korean history. On 6 March 1946, the decree on land reform was published, which distributed all large estates to those who tilled them and provided compensation only to "patriotic" landlords. The distribution of the land to individual farmers was put under the control of the District People's Committees. Decision Number 91 of the North Korean Interim People's Committee, proclaimed on 6 October 1946, nationalized all industry owned by the Japanese or by collaborators. Again, in keeping with Stalinist policy, there was an attempt to exempt the so-called patriotic bourgeoisie from these strictures. However, this attempt at class collaboration failed, since almost all Northern business owners and their families moved into the American-occupied zone, where many went on to play significant roles in the South Korean right. As long-time Korean expert and Harvard professor, George McCune, wrote in 1950:

"The mass of the Korean people in the north reacted favorably toward the Russian regime especially when it was accompanied by many of the revolutionary benefits of a socialist society. In South Korea, on the other hand, the so-called fundamental freedoms of democratic society were not much appreciated by the Korean people in view of the lack of social reform and because of the irregularity with which democracy was applied."

—G. McCune, *Korea Today*

The "irregularities" were of course due to fears about the results. According to a U.S. intelligence report of February 1946, the left would overwhelmingly win any fair election called on the peninsula. To avoid this, the American authorities were compelled to be a bit "irregular" in their application.

The dramatic difference between the Soviet and American occupations is not explained by Stalin having a more benevolent disposition toward workers and peasants than Truman or Hodge. It was because Stalin's regime rested on

a very different form of social relations than Truman's: the major means of production in the USSR were socially owned. In order to retain control of occupied areas, whether in Eastern Europe or North Korea, it was necessary for the Soviets to bring local social relations into line with those prevailing within the USSR itself. Since the demands of the workers and peasants could only be met within the framework of socialized property, there was a certain correspondence between the indigenous drive for social revolution and the aims of the Kremlin.

The fundamental incompatibility of the social system in the USSR with that of its capitalist "partners" meant that, despite Stalin's best efforts, the wartime alliance could not long survive the defeat of Germany and Japan. This global polarization had an immediate effect in Korea. Korea was supposed to be administered under a joint U.S.-Soviet trusteeship; however, talks between the two broke down both in the spring of 1946 and then again in the fall of 1947. During the latter round of discussions, the Soviets proposed simultaneous withdrawal of Soviet and American troops. Worried that their client regime in Seoul, which had barely survived mass uprisings in 1946, might succumb without an American military presence, the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the negotiations. The American strategy was to turn the issue over to the United Nations, which they dominated. A United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) was set up to administer Southern affairs until Korea could make the transition to a "democracy" to the West's liking.

The 1948 Cheju Island Uprising

The formation of the Commission set off another cycle of grass-roots resistance in the South. The Stalinist South Korean Labor Party (SKLP) organized a three-day general strike beginning on 7 February 1948. In April, after UNTCOK announced that it would be conducting a separate election in the South, there was a guerrilla uprising on Cheju Island off the south coast of Korea, in which some rightists and military officials were killed. The central government reacted with a bloody crackdown. With U.S. naval and air support, they massacred between thirty and sixty thousand islanders (10 to 20 percent of the whole population) and forced tens of thousands of others to flee to Japan. The guerrillas fought on for months without any source of supplies, but were finally crushed. When elections were eventually held on Cheju, after the bloody "pacification" campaign, UNTCOK reported that they were "marked by quietness" (J. Merrill, "Internal Warfare in Korea," in ed. B. Cumings, *Child of Conflict*).

UNTCOK's decision to conduct separate elections in South Korea was not only unpopular on Cheju, it was opposed by all elements of Korean society—with the exception of the far right and, of course, the puppet regime. Even Rhee's bourgeois opponents (among them Kim Ku, who had been Rhee's second-in-command in the Korean Provisional Government in exile) denounced the move as signifying the permanent division of the country. They met with representatives of the North Korean regime at conferences in Haeju and Pyongyang. All the opposition parties boycotted the election, but UNTCOK's official report nonetheless blandly declared the elections "a valid expression of the free will of the electorate in those parts of Korea which were accessible to the Commission" (quoted in Lone & McCormack, *op cit.*).

On the basis of these elections, the Republic of Korea

(ROK) was declared in the South, with Rhee as president. It was quickly recognized by the United Nations General Assembly as the sole legal government in Korea. In response, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was declared in the North, and the division of the nation was formalized. In late 1948 there was a renewed wave of unrest in the South. Elements of the ROK military at Yosu and Sunchon mutinied rather than be sent to suppress the remnants of guerrilla resistance from the Cheju rebellion. The reestablishment of People's Committees in Yosu created a political crisis for the regime on the mainland that was only contained with American assistance. As in Cheju, the rebels eventually retreated into the mountains to carry on a guerrilla struggle.

In 1949 both Soviet and American troops withdrew from the peninsula. Rhee was busy consolidating his police state, and even arrested some of the deputies put in place by the fraudulent National Assembly elections of the year before. He also arranged the assassination of Kim Ku, a right-wing bourgeois opponent. As the year progressed, war between the two halves of Korea seemed increasingly likely. Rhee could not eliminate the pro-North guerrillas, but they could not win without bringing Kim's regime into the conflict. Border incidents escalated throughout the year.

Kim privately sought support from Stalin and Mao Zedong for an invasion of the ROK. They were both somewhat reluctant, but ultimately agreed, based on the assurances of Kim and SKLP leader Park Hon Yong that Communist support in the South was so extensive that the invasion would meet with quick success. Stalin no doubt saw Kim's plan as a relatively cheap way to cause problems for his imperialist antagonists, but he was concerned above all with avoiding a general war, and thus was only prepared to give covert assistance to the People's Army. Mao also gave his blessing, although his attention was concentrated on invading Taiwan to uproot the last remnants of Chiang Kai Shek's Kuomintang government. All of this was denied in the official Soviet, Chinese and North Korean histories, which claimed that the North was simply attacked without provocation by the Rhee regime. Recent evidence from Soviet archives confirms that Kim planned an attack, and that Stalin and Mao knew about it (see S.N. Goncharov et al., *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao and the Korean War*).

It is also clear that Rhee's regime had aggressive intentions. Rhee publicly declared his desire to reunite the peninsula by force. In October 1949, he boasted that it would take him just three days to capture Pyongyang. General William Roberts, leader of the U.S. Korean Military Advisor Group (KMAG), the American military personnel who remained in the South to assist Rhee's army after the general withdrawal, asserted:

"KMAG is a living demonstration of how an intelligent and intensive investment of 500 combat-hardened American men and officers can train 100,000 guys to do the shooting for you...At this point we rather invite [an invasion from the North]. It will give us target practice."

—B. Cumings and J. Halliday, *Korea: The Unknown War*

Gen. Roberts' confidence was misplaced. In the first weeks of fighting, the People's Army advanced quickly against the supposedly superior ROK forces. It turned out that the conscripted sons of workers and peasants felt no particular desire to fight for Syngman Rhee's capitalist regime nor to "do the shooting" for his imperialist patrons. The South Korean Army melted away as the North advanced. In the wake of the People's Army's bayonets came

the extension of the North's deformed social revolution. In the three months when they occupied most of the South, the KPA redistributed land and confiscated the property of Rhee's government and its cronies, Japanese corporations and other monopolists. The mass of the population appeared to welcome the "invaders." U.S. General William F. Dean, writing at the height of the Cold War, observed: "To me, the civilian attitude [to the KPA occupation] seemed to vary between enthusiasm and passive acceptance" (W. Dean, *General Dean's Story*, 1954).

The American government was not prepared to tolerate Korean reunification under Kim Il Sung. Earlier in the year, Secretary of State Dean Acheson had speculated that the U.S. would not get involved in an intra-Korean dispute, a statement which heartened Kim and outraged Rhee. However, when hostilities erupted, Washington intervened militarily to protect neo-colonialism in Asia. On 12 April 1950, President Harry Truman had received a confidential memo from the State Department (NSC 68) advocating a change of policy from "containment" of social revolution to "rollback." The proponents of an Asian war in the so-called China Lobby were in the ascendant, and had the clear support of Douglas MacArthur, John Foster Dulles and other powerful civilian and military officials concerned with Far East policy.

Within hours of hearing of the North Korean advance, Truman decided in favor of intervention. On 29 June, UNTCOK determined that the war was caused by Northern aggression, and called for UN intervention. A U.S. motion was quickly passed in the Security Council, which the Soviet Union was boycotting to protest the refusal to seat Mao's China. The UN army was made up of units from sixteen countries besides the U.S., including Britain, Canada, Australia and South Africa. The megalomaniacal MacArthur was placed in overall command.

By mid-September, the KPA had the UN and ROK forces holed up behind the "Pusan Perimeter," in the southeast corner of the peninsula and military defeat for Rhee's forces loomed. But the imperialist coalition had control of the sea and air. On 15 September, MacArthur launched a massive amphibious assault at Inchon Bay, just to the west of Seoul, which was virtually unopposed. Within two weeks, the foreign expeditionary armies had chased the KPA back across the 38th parallel. The United Nations, its involvement ostensibly justified by concern for the sanctity of international borders, did not regard that line with undue sentimentality. MacArthur and Truman decided that this was a perfect opportunity to initiate the "rollback" of Communism they desired, and UN troops began their march to the Yalu River (the border between China and Korea).

UN Counterrevolutionary Terror

Counterrevolutionary terror is always vastly bloodier than social revolution, and the UN re-occupation of Korea was no exception. Unlike the KPA which had triumphed over ROK troops so easily because of its popular support in the South, the U.S.-led imperialist armies treated the entire population as enemies, whom they described in crude racist terms as "gooks in white pyjamas." According to a Japanese estimate quoted by McCormack, over 100,000 people were executed during the UN "liberation." This was to provide a model for the CIA's notorious Phoenix Program of assassination during the Vietnam War. As in Vietnam, the imperialists used their superior air and sea power to inflict massive devastation. As his troops moved northward in

November 1950, MacArthur ordered his psychopathic subordinate Curtis LeMay (who later became infamous for his call to bomb Vietnam "into the Stone Age") to bomb "every installation, factory, city and village" between the front and the Chinese border, (Cumings & Halliday, *op cit.*). The wanton, racist brutality of the U.S. assault derived from the nature of the war—the Americans were not merely seeking to crush a hostile state, but to destroy a social revolution.

By November the imperialists clearly expected to reach the Chinese border without significant resistance. They howled with outrage when UN forces were counterattacked by 200,000 Chinese and 150,000 North Korean troops on 27 November. The entry of the People's Republic of China threw the imperialists once more on to the defensive. The UN sanctimoniously condemned China for "aggression," while Truman publicly stated that the use of the atomic bomb against China was "under consideration." The racist perpetrators of Hiroshima and Nagasaki threatened to strike again.

As the UN troops retreated southwards, they were subject to guerrilla harassment, and MacArthur began to openly call for World War III. In early 1951, the CIA organized clandestine raids on the Chinese mainland, while MacArthur argued that he could only win the war by nuclear annihilation of major Chinese cities.

However, something important had happened since 1945: the Soviet Union had acquired the bomb. Truman might feel sanguine about the fact that the Soviets lacked the means to deliver it to the U.S. effectively, but his European allies were worried. British Prime Minister Clement Attlee flew to Washington to ask for assurances that nuclear weapons would not be used, and to demand that MacArthur be fired. This was not because he had any objections to the mass slaughter of Asians (Attlee had supported the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Britain was waging a bloody war of repression against leftist insurgents in Malaya at the time), but because he felt a little nervous about the prospect of Soviet bombers flying over London. Truman indicated he appreciated Attlee's concerns, but refrained from making any commitments.

In fact, on 6 April 1951, Truman had signed an order granting MacArthur control of 26 atomic bombs, and it was only the fear of a total breakdown of the imperialist alliance that forced him to rescind his order and fire MacArthur five days later (Lone & McCormack, *op cit.*). Firing MacArthur did not end the consideration of a U.S. "nuclear option" in Korea. In 1953 Eisenhower publicly mused that nukes were "cheaper dollar-wise" than conventional weapons. There is no doubt that if it were not for the Soviet nuclear arsenal, the U.S. imperialists would have once again dropped nuclear bombs on Asian cities.

As it was, the USAF "conventional" bombing, which included 7.8 million gallons of napalm in the first three months alone, left North Korea a wasteland. Curtis LeMay recalled that, "over a period of three years or so... we burned down every town in North Korea and South Korea, too" (*Ibid.*). After the ground war reached a stalemate in the summer of 1951, the UN engaged primarily in aerial and naval bombardment of the Northern population. In addition to repeated attacks on cities, the USAF also launched a campaign in May 1953, just as the war was winding down, against irrigation dams in the North in a bid to destroy North Korean agriculture and starve the people into submission.

Talks opened up in July 1951, but despite the fact that it

had become clear that neither side had the capacity to impose a military reunification, the war dragged on for a further two years. One key sticking point was the question of repatriation of POWs. Hoping to win a propaganda victory, the imperialists insisted on the principle of “voluntary repatriation,” according to which POWs would get to decide on which side of the ideological divide of Chinese and Korean society they wanted to align themselves. Naturally, this choice was not all that “voluntary.” While wishing to encourage North Korean and Chinese POWs to defect, the U.S. military took a hard line on those who refused the blandishments of their captors. As General Ridgway, Mac-Arthur’s successor, later recalled: “I was determined that if the Red POWs made any resistance, or attempted any delay in carrying out our demands, we would shoot, and I wanted the killing machinery on hand to do a thorough job of it” (Cumings & Halliday, *op cit.*).

Eventually an armistice was reached on 27 July 1953, and Korea was left divided, as it remains to this day. Some 3 million Koreans (over 10 percent of the population) were dead, along with as many as a million Chinese soldiers (*Ibid.*). There were also 33,500 U.S. soldiers killed. The end of the war led to a carnival of repression in the South. Rhee’s orchestrated “conspiracy trials” for his bourgeois rivals reached such a level that his colonial overlords toyed with the idea of overthrowing him (“Operation Everready”). In the North, Kim Il Sung’s party was purged of those thought not to be sufficiently loyal to the “Great Leader.” One victim of this purge was Park Hon Yong, the former SKLP leader, who was accused, among other things, of misleading Kim about the ease with which an invasion could be carried out. This accusation is strange on two counts: first, because the campaign did go smoothly, and secondly, because Kim’s regime always claimed that the war was started by a Southern attack.

Kim Il Sung headed the state created by the deformed social revolution that the Soviet Army had initiated for a further 41 years. North Korea is one of the most bizarre Stalinist dictatorships in history—certainly Kim Il Sung’s personality cult was the most grotesque. But the social transformation North Korea experienced represented important gains for its citizens, particularly in terms of women’s rights and the provision of food and shelter, day-care, healthcare and education for the population. Today, isolated in a hostile world, particularly after the collapse of the USSR and its abandonment by Beijing, North Korea’s economy is contracting and living standards are falling.

Nonetheless, the gains of the social transformation North Korea experienced remain, and must be defended. Today it is the task of the Korean working class to complete the unfinished business left by the War through the revolutionary reunification of Korea—proletarian political revolution to oust the Kim Jong Il regime in the North and social revolution to expropriate the capitalists in the South.

The Reaction of the International Left

The various currents in the workers’ movement reacted to the Korean War (which many took to be the opening round of World War III) in characteristic fashion. The Communist Parties opposed the war and expressed their solidarity with the North Korean regime; however, they did so on a pacifist basis, hoping to find a “progressive” wing of the bourgeoisie in their home countries that would oppose the Cold War. They emphasized Pyongyang’s claim that

Southern armies attacked first, and confined their agitation to pleas for “peace” and a negotiated solution.

The social democrats, for example the British Labour Party, parroted the line of their rulers, and applauded the imperialist intervention. This was to be expected, as the social democrats were acting as the chief agency of the capitalists inside the workers’ movement, and had, throughout Europe, knowingly taken money from the CIA, and enthusiastically spearheaded anti-Communist witch-hunts.

Only the Trotskyists took a revolutionary position on the war. Before World War II, Trotsky had identified the Soviet Union as a “degenerated workers’ state,” whose social foundations were fundamentally antagonistic toward capitalism and which, as a result, should be defended in wars with capitalist states. By the time of the Korean War, the majority of the parties of the Trotskyist Fourth International recognized that the states created by the extension of the Red Army after the World War, including North Korea, were qualitatively similar to the Soviet Union, and called them “deformed workers’ states.” As a result, they concluded that the international working class had a side in the war, and backed the North against the imperialists and their allies.

Michel Pablo was the leading figure in the Fourth International during this period. His developing notions about the imminence of a global War/Revolution were largely shaped by the events surrounding the Korean War. Pablo’s conclusions were profoundly revisionist—he called for the dissolution of the Trotskyist cadres into the mass social-democratic and Stalinist parties. But while Pablo’s liquidationist impulses were based on a crudely objectivist view of historical development, manifested in this case as an overly optimistic assessment of the revolutionary capacities of the Stalinists, at the outbreak of the war he was still capable of projecting a revolutionary position. In an article published in the American Socialist Workers Party’s theoretical journal, *Fourth International*, in September 1950, Pablo wrote:

“The only possible revolutionary attitude is to participate in this movement of the colonial masses and to struggle within it against its exploitation by the Soviet bureaucracy. But the primary condition for realizing this possibility is the *unconditional defense of this movement against the native feudal-capitalists and above all against imperialism.*”

The leader of the Socialist Workers Party (at that time the leading section of the Fourth International), James P. Cannon, also took the right position in an open letter to Truman, published in *The Militant* on July 31, 1950:

“This is more than a fight for unification and national liberation. It is a civil war. On the one side are the Korean

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workers, peasants and student youth. On the other are the Korean landlords, usurers, capitalists and their police and political agents. The impoverished and exploited working masses have risen up to drive out the native parasites as well as their foreign protectors.

“Whatever the wishes of the Kremlin, a class war has been unfolding in Korea. The North Korean regime, desiring to mobilize popular support, has decreed land reforms and taken nationalization measures in the territories it has won. The establishment of people’s committees has been reported. These reforms, these promises of a better economic and social order have attracted the peasants and workers. This prospect of a new life is what has imbued a starving subject people with the will to fight to the death. This is the ‘secret weapon’ that has wrested two-thirds of South Korea from U.S. imperialism and its native agents and withstood the troops and bombing fleets of mighty Wall Street.”

—reprinted in James P. Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator*

The British Workers Power organization, citing this letter, absurdly concludes that Cannon failed to take a defeatist position toward the imperialist assault: “While the SWP could not be justifiably criticised for not raising ‘defeat’ in every article, we are justified in castigating them for *never* doing so!” (*Permanent Revolution*, Spring 1988, emphasis in original). In his letter Cannon repeatedly emphasizes the fact that, “The whole of the Korean people—save for the few bought-and-paid-for agents of the Rhee puppet regime—are fighting the imperialist invaders.” He concludes: “The right in this struggle is all on the side of the Korean people. Like the colonial peoples everywhere in Asia, they want no part of U.S., or even UN ‘liberation’.”

This is clearly a call for the defeat of the UN/imperialist armies. Yet while correct on the fundamental question of which side to support, the political weaknesses of the SWP’s aging cadre, exacerbated by the extreme pressures operating on American leftists at the height of the anti-communist witchhunt, were reflected in some serious political wobbles. Cannon’s open letters to Truman, widely publicized by the *Militant* as the SWP’s major popular statements on the war, contained pacifist and even patriotic passages. For instance, Cannon concluded his 4 December 1950 letter:

“This great and good American people abhor militarism and war. They love the ways of peace and freedom. They are trying to tell you their will: STOP THE WAR NOW!”

He even included an appeal to “the revolutionary and democratic tradition” of the American War of Independence!

Their more propagandistic materials evidenced the political disorientation of the SWP (in common with the other sections of the international) over the potential of the Stalinist parties to act as blunted instruments of workers’ revolution. This confusion was to crystallize in Pablo’s objectivist theory of a “New World Reality” in which there was no role for Marxist cadres besides acting as auxiliaries to the mass reformist social-democratic and Stalinist parties. The latter would, according to Pablo’s theory, be compelled by the exigencies of history to outline a roughly revolutionary path.

The inroads that this revisionist methodology had made in the SWP can be seen in an article by J.B. Stuart (Sam Gordon), “Civil War in Korea,” published in the September-October 1950 issue of *Fourth International*, which, after making several insightful criticisms of the Stalinists, concludes by quoting Kim Il Sung about the importance of the

leadership of the working class and declaring:

“The force of the Asian revolution itself compels the native leaders to cast off their Stalinist miseducation and in contrast to Stalin’s policy for decades, to seek out, however hesitantly and confusedly, the great strategic concepts of the October Revolution.”

This tendency to believe that the objective situation alone could force Stalinists and other petty-bourgeois elements to become “confused” Trotskyists was first manifested in the Fourth International’s earlier short-lived embrace of the Titoite bureaucrats in Yugoslavia, and ultimately led to the SWP’s complete abandonment of Trotskyism when they opted a decade later to become uncritical publicists for Castro’s Cuba.

If the Fourth International was inconsistent in separating the necessity to defend the Stalinist-led movements *militarily* against imperialism from the question of giving them any kind of *political* support, other currents, which also claimed affinity with the Trotskyist tradition, refused, under the pressure of the Cold War, to defend the Korean revolution against imperialism at all. A loose international bloc of groups, which came together to support a “Third Camp” position of “Neither Washington nor Moscow,” produced a steady stream of polemics against the Trotskyists for defending “Stalinist totalitarianism.” Most of these tendencies have long since disappeared, but one of them, Tony Cliff’s International Socialist tendency, has grown into a sizable group.

In the late 1940s, Cliff formed a faction within the British section of the Fourth International that held that the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe were “state capitalist,” despite the absence of private ownership of the means of production. Cliff asserted that the Soviet bloc regimes were capitalist because they accumulated means of production and engaged in “military competition” with the West. This theory was based on the elementary confusion between means of production, which exist in every society, and capital, which is a social relationship, as well as on the absurd assertion that military competition is specific to capitalism, when it is clearly a function of all states, regardless of social character. Cliff could never explain, for example, why the Soviet Union under Lenin and Trotsky should not also be considered “state capitalist,” as it too engaged, as best it could, in the accumulation of means of production, as well as vigorous military competition with the imperialist armies and their White allies from 1918 to 1921. Cliff’s notion about Soviet “State Capitalism” may have lacked theoretical rigor, but it had undeniable political advantages, as it removed the obligation to undertake the unpopular defense of the Soviet bloc during the height of the Cold War.

Cliff and his followers were expelled by the British Trotskyists when they broke discipline by publicly refusing to defend North Korea when war broke out. They remained in the Labour Party, where they published a journal called *Socialist Review*, which advocated “the earliest possible return of a Labour Government” committed to “a foreign policy based on independence of both Washington and Moscow.” In the second issue of their journal, they published a statement from a Sri Lankan renegade from Trotskyism saying:

“So long as the two governments [North and South Korea] are what they are, viz., puppets of the two big powers, the Korean socialists can give no support to their respective puppet governments.”

—V. Karalasingham, “The War in Korea”, *Socialist Review*, January 1951

The invasion by the imperialist alliance, the murderous aerial bombardment, and the threats of nuclear attack did not change their minds:

“Korea is merely the cockpit where the two power blocs are testing their respective strengths in readiness for World War III. Whoever defends either side in this war, no matter how well-intentioned, is rendering no service either to socialism or the Korean people.”

—“Korea: End this ‘Liberating’!,” *Socialist Review*
November 1952

Socialist Review avoided commenting on the pre-war class conflicts that had rocked Korean society, or the progressive measures implemented by the Northern government, except to dismiss them as irrelevant.

A decade after the end of the Korean War, the U.S. was becoming embroiled in another major conflict in Asia, this time in Vietnam. As in Korea, the imperialists sought to maintain the arbitrary division of Vietnam and refused to hold national elections when it became clear that their unpopular puppet regime would lose a free vote. Both wars began with popular insurgency in the capitalist half of the country, which led to conventional war. In both countries the conflict pitted a Stalinist regime supported by a mass-based indigenous guerrilla movement, and backed by China and the USSR, against an unpopular neo-colonial client state supported by the U.S. and a coalition of its imperialist partners and vassals. In both cases, under the guise of defending freedom, the imperialists conducted a blatantly racist campaign of mass, indiscriminate extermination of people they regarded as sub-human “gooks.” In both cases the strategy of massive indiscriminate bombing was designed to inflict maximum damage on the “enemy” population, while minimizing imperialist casualties. In both wars the result was millions of civilian deaths.

The U.S. war came as a sequel to the struggle led by Ho Chi Minh’s Stalinist armies to defeat Vietnam’s French colonial masters. The January-February 1952 issue of Cliff’s *Socialist Review* reprinted an article that pointed to the similarity between the struggles then underway in Korea and Vietnam against foreign imperialists, and refused to support either of them:

“In Vietnam likewise [i.e., to Korea], the war continues, and the people vomit with disgust at both Bao-Dai, the tool of the colonialists, and at Ho-Chi-Minh, the agent of Stalin.”

An editorial note advised readers that *Socialist Review* “agree[s] entirely” with the article.

Yet fifteen years later, the Cliffites, who were then called the International Socialists (IS), and were operating outside the Labour Party, were actively building the Vietnam Solidarity Movement and supporting the victory of the Stalinists. In a retrospective published in the October 1993 issue of the new series of *Socialist Review*, Chris Harman reminisced:

“The International Socialists, as the SWP was then called, had three or four hundred members at the beginning of 1968. I remember going on demonstrations when 2,000 people would march behind our banner saying ‘Victory to the NLF in Vietnam’, singing the *Internationale*—something we’d never experienced before.”

—*Socialist Review*, October 1993

Why did the IS take such a different approach in Vietnam? The Cliffite zigzag cannot be explained by any difference in the character of the contending forces, because there was none. What had changed was the mood in the milieu from which they hoped to recruit. In the early 1950s, when anti-Communist hysteria was at its height, the Cliffites were buried in the Labour Party. In the 1984 edition of the *Socialist Register* Jon Halliday recounts how during the war the Labour cabinet held a:

“discussion over whether or not to prosecute the *Daily Worker*—for treason—for publishing Alan Winnington’s pamphlet, *I Saw the Truth in Korea* (which simply exposed crimes by Rhee’s government, none of which had been disproved). There seems to be only one reason the cabinet decided not to prosecute—because if the verdict was ‘guilty’ there was only one sentence possible: death, which was mandatory.”

In the early 1950s the “Third Camp” was a nice safe place to be. But by the late 1960s things had changed—there were tens of thousands of student radicals, and everyone to the left of Harold Wilson was for the victory of the NLF. Had the IS retained its “Third-Camp” position, it would have been isolated from the radical milieu. And so Tony Cliff & Co., never ones to let principles, even bad ones, get in the way of recruitment opportunities, hoisted the banner of Ho Chi Minh and the NLF.

We lay claim to a different tradition—that of the Fourth Internationalists, who, despite terrible pressures, and considerable confusion and disorientation, attempted to apply the principles of Trotskyism to the world in which they found themselves, and at least had the courage to take a stand in defense of the North Korean deformed workers’ state against imperialism. ■