

(a) Compare and contrast the evidence provided in Sources A and B about the reasons for Soviet involvement in Korea.

Both sources concur that Soviet involvement in Korea was prompted by US actions in other parts of the world, particularly Europe. In Source A, Stalin contends that the USSR's "new stance" acceding to Kim's proposed invasion of South Korea was a product of US "dishonest, perfidious and arrogant behaviour... in Europe, the Balkans, [and] the Middle East", citing American treachery in a list of geographical regions as a key reason for Soviet involvement. Further, Stalin highlights the "form[ation of] NATO" as an aggressive act that rendered the US an "adversary", necessitating a Soviet response as it could no longer "bind itself" to agreements with the US. Source B paints a similar picture: US successes in Europe were of central importance to Stalin when he decided to intervene in Korea, highlighting "the Greek-Turkish aid programme, the Marshall Plan, the Berlin Airlift and NATO" as key "difficulties" faced by Stalin. In fact, Soviet involvement in Korea was intended to "dr[aw] the United States" into the region and "distract the Americans from Europe", revealing how Soviet aims revolved around undermining US triumphs in the European theatre. In this light, both sources highlight how US actions elsewhere were central to Soviet motivations for participating in the Korean War.

Both sources present Soviet involvement as spurred by US actions as this coheres with empirical reality: Stalin saw Europe as the primary theatre of the Cold War and was highly concerned about US activity in that arena. In fact, Stalin had rejected Kim's March 1949 request to invade the South as he was pre-occupied with the Berlin Blockade, and it was only after the European situation stabilised with the end of the Blockade and the formation of East Germany that Stalin acquiesced in April 1950 at the third time of asking. Given the central importance of American presence in Europe to Stalin, both Source A — an account of Stalin's personal conversations with Kim — and Source B — a historian's assessment of Stalin's calculus when intervening — would likely reflect this key consideration of his.

However, the sources drastically diverge in depicting the nature of Soviet motivations — while Source A presents its aims as defensive, Source B suggests its aims were offensive. Source A's account of Soviet intentions focuses on self-defence: the USSR was merely responding to the US's "dishonest, perfidious and arrogant behaviour" and guarding itself against the provocation of an "adversary". Additionally, Stalin argues that Soviet participation in the invasion was meant to "forestall [South Korea's] aggression" as it would "launch an attack on the North". In this light, Soviet involvement was merely intended to pre-emptively

safeguard the North's sovereignty from the belligerence of the South, lending Soviet motivations a distinctly defensive character. Source B instead argues that Soviet intentions were offensive in nature: Stalin was tempted by favourable prospects for "further revolutionary advances" in Asia, revealing his hegemonic ambitions in the region. On top of furthering the Communist cause, Stalin also sought to "distract the Americans from Europe, the most critical theatre of the Cold War": involvement was a gambit to allow the Soviets to seize the initiative in Europe after "run[ning] into difficulties". Thus, Soviet motivations are presented as offensive and instigative.

This difference can be explained by their varying provenances: Source A must be read in light of the fact that Stalin's April 1950 meeting with Kim represented a significant policy reversal on Stalin's part, when Stalin formally supported Kim's plan to invade the South after two previous rejections for fear of provoking US reprisal and sparking a major global conflict. Hence, Stalin's explication of Soviet motives as defensive in nature served to justify his U-turn to Kim: given that the US has already become an "adversary" and the South was already planning an "attack on the North", conflict had already begun and Stalin's prior hesitations no longer applied. Furthermore, this account of Soviet intentions is unsurprising considering that it was summarised and mediated by a Russian journalist, subject to draconian Soviet media censorship and compelled to present Soviet reasons for involvement in the favourable light of self-defence.

Comparatively, Source B's contention that USSR involvement in Korea was intended to offensively advance Soviet interests in Asia and Europe is informed by its context of production in 2004. With the opening of the Soviet archives in 1991, the lack of government censorship and 50 years of historical distance, Stueck is able to provide a more detailed and objective analysis of Soviet motivations. Therefore, his presentation of Stalin's aims — opportunistically seeking to further USSR interests via his manoeuvres in Korea — is characteristic of Cold War historiography in the post-1991 era.

(b) How far do Sources A to F support the view that the Korean War was a superpower conflict?

Sources A, B and C advance the view that the Korean War was a superpower conflict, while Sources D, E and F reject this proposition.

Firstly, Sources A, B and C collectively contend that the outbreak of the Korean War was a product of geopolitical and ideological competition between superpowers. Sources A and B contextualise the war's outbreak against the backdrop of fierce geopolitical rivalry between

the US and USSR. In Source A, Stalin attributes his support for Kim's proposed invasion to America's "dishonest, perfidious and arrogant behaviour", taking particular aim at the US's decision "to form NATO" which united Western Europe against the USSR. In this light, his sponsoring of the Korean War was an act of retaliation against their "adversary" America, making the outbreak of war a result of superpower competition. Similarly, Source B details the way Stalin saw the Korean War through the lens of US-USSR competition in Asia: he sought to achieve "stepped-up Communist pressure" and "further revolutionary advances" in Asia given his "difficulties" in the European "theatre of the Cold War". Hence, the USSR backed Kim's invasion in the hope of opening a new front for their geopolitical battle with the US, making the eruption of the Korean conflict a product of superpower rivalry. Further, Source C situates Korea amidst the ideological contestation between superpowers: Stevens cites the "ideological struggle between East and West, between communism and Western political concepts" and presents Korea as a "round in our match with the Soviet Union". In fact, Korea carries massive implications "far beyond their immediate local consequences" and is tied to the "prestige" of the US. Thus, the sources argue that the Korean War's outbreak is inextricably linked to superpower rivalry.

However, this argument has limited grounding in reality: while it was true that competition with the US heavily featured in Stalin's decision-making calculus, he was concerned about *averting* superpower conflict rather than instigating one. Stalin only reluctantly permitted Kim's proposed invasion only after three attempts at persuasion, and even then, it was conditional on a short victorious war with Chinese support. In fact, Source B itself reveals Stalin coercing Mao to "aid... North Korea if it ran into difficulty with the Americans" so it need not commit numerous troops of its own, evincing the USSR's unwillingness to enter the conflict. Further, Source E highlights that Stalin's decision was founded on a miscalculation that the US would not intervene in support of the South ("war with the USA could be avoided"), considering Korea's exclusion from the US's defence perimeter in Acheson's Press Club speech. Similarly, the US had little interest in sparking a conflict, withdrawing troops from Korea alongside the USSR in 1949. Hence, there is little reason to believe superpower competition led to the Korean War's outbreak.

Additionally, Source C is limited in utility as a source on the Korean War — written in 1947 long before the onset of the war, it does not specifically address the Korean War and merely discusses Korea's importance in general. Further, Stevens' 1947 perspective on superpower competition is likely unrepresentative of the situation in 1950 Korea: as part of the Division of Eastern European Affairs in 1947, Stevens would have been confronted with the accelerating Sovietisation of Eastern Europe and heightened tensions with the launch of the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan. Against this backdrop, Stevens' account — informed by

his immediate context — would not have reflected the state of superpower ideological competition immediately before the Korean War in 1950.

Secondly, Source B argues that local actors in Korea had little agency and were proxies controlled by larger superpowers, making the war a superpower conflict. Stueck claims that Stalin had “manoeuvred Mao” such that he could “hardly resist Kim’s plan” or “avoid coming to the aid of North Korea”, elucidating the USSR’s manipulation of China to suit its own geopolitical goal of ensuring Kim’s successful invasion. In fact, China was beholden to the USSR both politically (“granted Mao his wish for a new treaty”) and militarily (“Mao needed continued Soviet air and naval assistance”), leaving the nation with little agency of its own. This depiction of local actors as proxies is implicitly reinforced by Source A. While it makes no direct mention of Stalin’s relationship with Kim, we know from context that the conversations summarised relate to Kim’s attempt to obtain Soviet permission for an invasion, and it was only “the Soviet Union’s new stance” that enabled him to start the conflict. Hence, local actors like China and North Korea were ultimately subject to the will of superpowers, framing the Korean War as a superpower clash.

This argument has comparatively more empirical merit. China, which desperately needed the \$300m in economic aid that Stalin promised under the Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty, was indeed put under pressure by Stalin to provide Kim military assistance, despite its war-weary state after its protracted civil war. Moreover, Kim’s repeated requests for Stalin to support his proposed invasion is a testament to his subordinate status vis-a-vis Stalin.

However, this argument alone is insufficient to comprehensively show that the Korean War was a superpower conflict right from the start: while Mao’s support for Kim in the war’s beginning stages did advance Soviet interests, his aid could also be attributed to ideological imperatives to support his communist ally and his personal indebtedness to Kim, who “assisted him” with 30,000 “Korean troops in the Chinese civil war”. Additionally, it was Kim that proposed and pressed for a war to fulfil his longtime ambition of reunifying Korea; it is an exaggeration to claim that Soviet acquiescence to and support for his plan meant Kim became a complete proxy for Soviet interests. Hence, local actors did possess some agency at the outbreak of war.

On the flip side, Sources D, E and F oppose the view that the Korean War is a superpower conflict. Firstly, Source D further contests the claim that China’s intervention was coerced by the USSR, instead propounding that China intervened to safeguard its own ideological and security interests, making the Korean War merely a civil conflict with the involvement of a regional power. The cartoon depicts a belligerent US soldier brutally stabbing an infant that represents North Korea, portraying the US as “wanton, imperialist aggress[ors]” wreaking

havoc in North Korea. Given their ideological opposition to American “imperialism”, China was thus forced to intervene. Additionally, this destructive conflict is likely to spill across the Yalu into China: a bomber is portrayed dropping a “US” bomb onto Chinese territory. In this light, China’s entry into the Korean War in 1950 is presented as an attempt to protect its own ideological position and territorial integrity, refuting Source B’s portrayal of China’s intervention as compelled by superpower interests.

This claim is factually accurate: sharing a border with a US-controlled unified Korea would pose a huge national security threat, necessitating Chinese military intervention to ensure the survival of Kim’s regime. Additionally, not only would a US victory set back the communist cause in Asia, its strategic aim of rolling back communism would threaten the CCP’s grip on power. Hence, ideological and security interests did play a significant role in spurring Chinese intervention, undermining the claim that the Korean War was a superpower conflict.

However, the source’s limited reliability renders this argument less strong than it could have been. Source D is a 1950 Chinese cartoon, produced under Mao’s authoritarian regime with strict government censorship and a completely state-controlled press. Thus, Source D — as a piece of government propaganda — would unsurprisingly have to paint Chinese motives for intervention in a highly favourable light. Given its strong political bias, the source likely excessively emphasises ideological and security concerns and omits the role of Soviet pressure in impelling Chinese intervention, rendering its reliability limited and weakening its otherwise-strong argument.

Sources E and F directly contradict the view that the Korean War was a superpower conflict, instead presenting it as a civil war instigated by local actors. Source E argues that Kim, not Stalin, was the mastermind of the Korean War: it asserts that “the war wasn’t Stalin’s idea, but Kim Il-Sung’s” and that “Kim was the initiator”. In fact, the proposal “appealed” to Stalin precisely because it would only be a local conflict rather than a clash of superpowers: it would be “an internal matter which the Koreans would be settling among themselves”. Hence, the Korean War is shown to be a domestic civil war, planned by and expected to be fought between local actors. Source F outlines Rhee’s similar plans for a Korean War: he “advocated an attack on the North”, “plead[ed]” for an invasion, and “militantly” supported Korean reunification. In fact, Rhee’s “provocative behaviour” included “threats to march north made many times before”, illustrating his resolute desire to start a conflict. With hawkish, war-mongering leaders in both North and South Korea, the sources collectively paint the outbreak of the Korean War as a product of domestic actors rather than superpower sponsors.

This argument holds true at the start of the war: the eruption of conflict in Korea was primarily due to local leaders, especially Kim. Both Kim and Rhee had repeatedly appealed to their superpower allies respectively for the 'green light' to reunify Korea in their image, since the country's shock division at the end of WWII was perceived by both leaders to be a temporary aberration that needed to be corrected via an invasion. However, this argument diminishes in persuasiveness as the Korean War developed. Superpowers would get increasingly involved: UN troops fighting for the South were heavily US-dominated, comprised of 90% US personnel and led by the US's General MacArthur, while the USSR would contribute military advisors and hundreds of pilots and aircraft. Further, the US and USSR pressured the reluctant Rhee and Kim respectively to participate in armistice talks and end the military stalemate. Hence, this argument does not hold for the entire duration of the Korean War.

Additionally, Source E's likely biased account of the war weakens the argument to some degree. While Khrushchev's position in Stalin's inner circle from 1949 to 1953 could give him intimate knowledge of Stalin-Kim discussions, his subsequent role as a Soviet leader also introduces a political agenda: he needed to distance the Soviet Union from the ultimately unsuccessful invasion to divert responsibility away from his nation. Thus, the degree of Soviet involvement in the outbreak of war is likely downplayed in the source, weakening the argument.

Ultimately, both supporting and opposing arguments are undermined by their sources' biases (e.g. D and E) or narrow contemporary perspectives (e.g. C). Most critically, all the sources pertain to the outbreak of the Korean War or the entry of China, with no sources offering perspectives on the ensuing stalemate or eventual armistice. Hence, none of the arguments account for the evolution of the Korean War over time, rendering them limited in nuance. Whether the Korean War is a local or superpower conflict varies depending on its stage: the stronger empirical bases of the opposing arguments highlight that the Korean War was largely a local conflict when it began, but it had become a superpower conflict by the time it ended.