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Book Review

Zihua, S. (2012) (Trans. Silver, N.). *Mao: Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s*. London: Routledge, xiii + 249 pp., $135, £80.

This extremely useful book covers both more and less than what it states in the title. More, because Shen Zihua delves back into the 1940s to uncover what he views as the crucial origins of communist decision making in 1950. And less, since the book focuses on the bilateral Stalin-Mao relationship, culminating with their crucial Korean War decisions in the summer and autumn. Indeed, although Shen includes some useful insights into how the economic repercussion of the war shaped the Sino–Soviet alliance for the remainder of the 1950s, this book belongs firmly with the large literature on why Stalin decided to back North Korea's invasion of the south in June 1950 and why Mao decided to intervene in the war in October.

Alongside the existing body of work on these questions, Shen seeks to make a contribution on four levels. First and most specifically, he reassesses Stalin's and Mao's specific motivations. In both instances, he emphasises economic and national-security factors: Stalin's keenness to acquire access to a warm water port in South Korea and Mao's determination to keep the fighting away from Chinese territory. Second, he argues for the need to view these decisions in a longer time frame. In Stalin's case, the replacement of the Yalta system with the new Sino–Soviet Treaty meant that in early 1950 the Soviet leader had effectively given up "most of the political and economic rights and interests that he had wrested from Chiang Kai-shek in 1945"; hence his sudden interest in letting Kim Il Sung invade South Korea, where the ports of "Inchon and Pusan would replace Lushun and Dalian, which he had pledged to return to China" (p. 118). For Mao, meanwhile, memories of the mid-1940s, when Soviet forces had first helped to defeat Japan and had then stayed in northeast China, convinced him of the dangers of letting another war come close to his borders; after all, if Soviet troops were now required against the Americans, they might this time stay for good. Third, Shen devotes considerable space to the one piece of concrete help Mao wanted from Stalin before intervening in the Korean War: air cover. He skilfully connects the tortuous negotiations between both sides on this question to their central policy priorities: for Stalin, avoiding direct involvement in the fighting; for

Mao, intervening before the war got too close to home. He also points out how, in the short term, these negotiations created major tensions in the alliance, but that as the war dragged on and Soviet material support escalated then bilateral relations were strengthened. Fourth, and more generally, these arguments place Shen firmly in the school of those who focus on security rather than ideology. Indeed, although he makes the odd reference to the role of communist ideology, Shen portrays Stalin and Mao as more hard-headed than romantic, more pessimistic than optimistic, even more defensive than offensive. Take Stalin's mindset in the first half of 1950. Instead of being caught up in the excitement of Mao's victory in the Chinese civil war, which suggested the correlation of forces was moving firmly in his direction and so he could confront the United States in Korea from a position of strength, Shen argues that the opposite was true. "The change in the political regime in China," he writes, "and the signing of the new Sino–Soviet treaty made Stalin wonder if Soviet interests in the Far East were threatened or, possibly, even lost" (p. 117).

Shen's conclusions, especially about Stalin's and Mao's motivations in 1950, can certainly be challenged. In fact, Yang Kuisong does just that in an elegant and incisive introduction that greatly strengthens this volume. As Yang points out, for instance, there was more to Stalin's thinking than gaining a warm water port. As Chen Jian and Shu Guang Zhang have also pointed out in other books, there was also more to Mao's risk-taking than protecting China's borders. Shen himself alludes to China's serious economic problems in 1950. These greatly compounded the dangers of going to war with the United States in Korea. Perhaps, therefore, it needed someone with such a "romantic" concept of warfare, who also saw that fighting the United States could cement the revolution at home, to take such a major gamble.

Shen has nevertheless produced a very valuable book. He is particularly good at placing these events in their Sino–Soviet context. His conclusions are based on a large number of archival sources, both Russian and Chinese, and his copious use of block quotes will be a major attraction for those looking for a good textbook for advanced-level students. Neil Silver has also produced a clear and crisp translation, which makes this a very readable book. I, for one, will certainly be using it for teaching.

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