

# The Korean War as Seen from France: Public Opinion and Political Perception

Laurent Quisefit

The beginning of the Korean War took France by surprise: the country was then mired in political instability following the resignation of its government on June 24, 1950. However, despite the political crisis, and despite the fact that Korea was almost unknown at the time, political memoirs, newspapers and archives show that the Korean question was discussed by the French, from politicians to the man in the street. This article focuses on the reactions of politicians, ranging from the radical leftwing to a weakened rightwing, and deals mainly with an analysis of the French communist press, the campaign to ban the atomic bomb, the Communist-led protests against the alleged germ warfare of the United States in Korea and General Ridgway coming to France, and last but not least, opinion polls conducted in 1950 concerning the War in Korea, the role of the UN, the Cold War and the risks of a Third World War. The latter was a prominent concern at the time, and was easily exploited by communist propaganda. In view of the communist agitation, violent riots and even acts of sabotage in armament factories, I propose to see in the political situation prevailing in France at the time, in the context of Cold War and Indochina War, the existence of a kind of “Cold Civil War,” which, fortunately, never became hot.

**Keywords:** Cold War, Korean War, France, Korea, communism, social unrest

## Introduction

In 1950, France was already at war on the Asian continent, where the French Army was suffering heavy losses at the hands of Ho Chi-Minh's Vietminh. In those days, the Indochina war did not get much public support in France, as some of the wounds of the Second World War had not yet been healed. Moreover, Indochina was expensive, geographically too far away from France,

---

*Laurent Quisefit (lquisefitcor@yahoo.fr) is a lecturer at Denis Diderot University, Paris.*

*Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 24, no. 1 (June 2011): 137-158.

© 2011 Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies

and the French community living there was not that significant. The political agenda was therefore dominated by European, especially French domestic issues.

Apart from Indochina, the sudden outbreak of War in Korea caught France at a time when it was preoccupied with many other subjects. Among these, the most important issues concerned the day to day problems of the people, such as wages and salaries, unemployment, price stability, and debates over the status of private and public education. As the Korean war was raging, the French government collapsed when the cabinet led by Georges Bidault resigned after Parliament voted down government legislation concerning civil servants' salaries, private education, and the question of the status of former French colonies.<sup>1</sup>

In those days, the socialists dominated the French political scene, having gained power in 1947. There was also a strong communist party, which was often able to cause disruption to economic as well as political life. In 1947 the government, though socialist, had to send military troops and tanks against striking miners, a crisis which ended with many arrests and the deaths of some workers.

Following the main political trends, public opinion was split into three major groups – from left to right of the political spectrum, we find the communists, the socialists, and the rightists, with, of course, some other smaller political groups existing alongside the big ones. As the Cold War progressed, French communists were engaged in propaganda campaigns in favour of peace. One such example was the “Stockholm Call,” which called for a ban on nuclear weapons. After the outbreak of war in Korea, they vehemently criticized American intervention while promoting the viewpoints of North Korea. The Korean War was also a good opportunity to stir up the already existing strong anti-American sentiment in France, which is explained by the prominent presence of US Army bases in half of its provinces.

This situation created many obstacles for the Cabinet when it had to decide on sending military troops to Korea, especially the dispatch of the French Army's UN battalion, which was to be engaged in Korea from November 1950 to the end of the War.<sup>2</sup> What is not so clear is how far public opinion, still

---

1. France tried to group its former colonies in a kind of Commonwealth called “Union Française,” but to no avail.

2. For a history of the French contribution to the Korean War, see Laurent Quisefit “Le rôle de la France dans la guerre de Corée,” *Han-Pul sugyo 120 nyōnsa ū chaejomyōng*, *Han'guk saron* 45 (2007); see also Laurent Quisefit, “Le rôle de la France dans la guerre coréenne (1950-1953), contribution à une histoire diplomatique et militaire des relations franco-coréennes,” Ph.D.

traumatized by the memories of the Second World War, and the hardships experienced by people in their daily lives, help explain some basic attitudes. However, the significance accorded to the Korean War in France is an accurate reflection of the political cleavages existing at the time. By studying political memoirs and newspaper articles, we can observe how the Korean War was perceived in France, ascertain the correctness of the available information, the influence and use of propaganda, as well as the real concerns, if any, behind the public's opinion regarding Korea.

Although the Embassy of Korea in Paris reportedly received about 20,000 letters expressing great concern and empathy for Korea, the people of France did not in fact pay that much attention to what was going on in the East. With the horrors of Nazi occupation and War in Europe still fresh in the minds of the people, they were more alarmed by the risk of a new war at home. Even though these letters are no longer available for research, French archives, personal memoirs and newspaper accounts, as well as opinion polls are available to have a balanced look at the reaction of France to the Korean War.

## French Politics and the “Korean affair”

### *1. Political Instability and the Perceptions of the Korean Situation*

The resignation of the Bidault Cabinet<sup>3</sup> left France in a political vacuum; as there was no government for several weeks, official political reactions were suspended. On June 25 and 26, President Auriol<sup>4</sup> received several politicians in order to choose a new prime minister (Président du Conseil). Although the president was greatly concerned about the Korean situation, as demonstrated by his summoning of Parodi, the then French Foreign Office's General Secretary (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères), to talk about the Korean crisis, in those days the French President had few powers, executive authority rested largely with the “Président du Conseil,” that is to say, the Prime Minister. On June 30, 1950, finally, Henri Queuille,<sup>5</sup> a moderate socialist political leader

---

dissertation (Paris 7 University, 2006).

3. Georges Bidault (1899-1983), Président du Conseil, i.e. Prime Minister, from October 28, 1949 to June 24, 1950, was a renowned French politician, many times Vice-President or Minister.

4. Vincent Auriol (1884-1966), French Président de la République from 1947 to 1954.

5. A moderate socialist, he belonged to the third important political force of the country during the 1950s.

became *Président du Conseil*. Immediately after assuming his duties, he addressed Parliament, but while his speech does not even mention Indochina, it does state that “for the first time, the collective security principle, established by the birth of the UN, could be applied to Korea.”<sup>6</sup>

However, on July 4, having barely formed his cabinet, Queuille suffered a vote of no confidence in Parliament, with 334 votes passed against him and only 221 in his favour. As a result, everything ground to a halt; France was once again in need of a new government. On July 12, René Pleven (1901-1993) was appointed the next prime minister. In his first address to Parliament, he referred to the situation in Korea, not in order to send troops over there, but to issue a call for a national unity with government stability; he underlined the necessity to unite and to display *sangfroid*, good temperament, discipline, “concern for fatherland.”<sup>7</sup> However, this objective did not mean a withdrawal of France from international engagements. On the contrary, it meant that France would be loyal to the UN,<sup>8</sup> explained the prime minister.

Since France had no government at the very beginning of the Korean War, the first cabinet meeting took place as late as July 19, and decided immediately to send a colonial frigate to Korea in order to support the allies and the UN. However, the Foreign Secretary, Mr Schuman, warned the Cabinet by saying that developments in Korea might have an impact on the whole world and especially in Germany, Yugoslavia, Formosa and Indochina: “There are weak points for which the Foreign Secretary deems it necessary to maintain permanent contacts with our two Allies.”<sup>9</sup> The fear they cause in all the countries, and more strangely at home, justify that we give our support to the mediation efforts undertaken by Great Britain and India in the Korean Affair.”<sup>10</sup>

In spite of the above, some French people feared a new war and many intellectuals or politicians noted in their diaries that some people had bought canned food, sugar, soap, etc. Raymond Aron, the famous specialist of international relations and philosopher, referred to this as a “quasi panic.”<sup>11</sup>

---

6. Alfred Grosser, *La IVe République et sa politique extérieure* (Paris: A. Colin, 1972, 3rd revised edition), 279.

7. *Ibid.*, 279-280.

8. *Ibid.*

9. I.e. Great Britain and the United States.

10. National Archives, 4AG/4, Minutes of the meetings of the Conseil des Ministres (Council of Ministers) July 19 1950.

11. Raymond Aron, *Mémoires* (Paris: Julliard, 1983).

Edgar Faure, a centrist politician, described it as follows in his memoirs.

Was it the beginning of a Third World War? . . . Would it be possible to contain the conflagration to its area of origin? Obsession and psychosis seized the Western world and it is in the United States, the country whose security was the least threatened, where it found its most troublesome expression. The Secretary of State Matthews even went as far as evoking the eventuality of a pre-emptive war, giving rise to the dilemma [of having to choose] between rollback and simple containment of Soviet imperialism.<sup>12</sup>

Then on 9 August 1950, Paul Reynaud, French delegate to the Consultative Assembly of the European Council, explaining the geopolitical stakes of the Korean War, exhorted the European countries to organize their common defence, invoking the scarecrow of Soviet military power, estimated at “175 [infantry] divisions, 25,000 tanks, 19,000 warplanes,” compared with the tiny dozen of ill-equipped and undermanned allied divisions stationed in western Europe.<sup>13</sup>

On 18 August 1950, while the Pusan perimeter was attacked by the North Korean army, the question of sending French troops to Korea in response to the UN requests was raised during a National Defence Committee meeting.<sup>14</sup> “To dispatch an all-volunteer battalion to Korea is technically impossible,” objected Jules Moch, the defence minister, obviously reluctant to send any man to Korea in view of the fact that the Indochina War was draining the best French army troops.<sup>15</sup> “To engage ourselves, even in a symbolic way, in the Korean Affair, offers many disadvantages. To do nothing is worse,” retorted René Pleven, the Prime Minister.

“It is necessary to send a battalion to Korea. In doing this, we . . . would strengthen, on the international scene, our situation in Indochina. Our participation, even modest, in the Korean War, shall assure us the allied assistance in case of new difficulties in Indochina” advocated Jean Letourneau, Minister of the Relations with the Associated States (French Union). At last, the decision was taken to send a brand new army Battalion, created in August, which was specifically drilled to be sent to Korea, and which finally arrived in

---

12. Edgar Faure, *Mémoires*, I (Paris: Plon, 1982), 290-291.

13. Paul Reynaud, extract from a speech delivered at the Consultative Assembly of the European Council. Minutes of the Second Term Session (7th to 26th august 1950, Volume I. Session 1 to 12. 1950, pp. 63-68).

14. August 18, 1950. French National Defense Committee.

15. French forces in Indochina attained the highest presence, between 95,000 and to 100,000 men in the years 1949-1950, and suffered heavy losses on several occasions.

Korea at the end of November.<sup>16</sup> This French UN Battalion was soon attached to the US 23rd infantry Regiment of the 2nd US Infantry Division, fought valiantly throughout the war,<sup>17</sup> getting many medals, awards and presidential citations, mostly French, American and Korean ones.

## *2. French Communists Reactions*

At that time, the Communists were one of the strongest political groups in France, although their influence was gradually declining. The Indochina War and the growing spectre of the Cold War mobilized people to protest against colonialism, against US imperialism and for the promotion of peace. Since there was resentment in some sectors of society against the presence of US troops, the cloak of Nazi imperialism was transferred to the former liberator, expressed in facile equations such as US=SS. In fact, they condemned all new moves designed to reinforce the West European defence, especially where it could mean creating the rebirth of a (West) German Army.<sup>18</sup>

Strong opposition to the Indochina War or to the rearmament of France was also noticed in the attitudes and actions of dock workers refusing to load army material on ships heading towards Indochina, and resorting to various strikes and protests, demanding more than anything else peace. In some cases, they even sabotaged weapons in the factories. During week-ends, especially on Saturday nights, bars and night-clubs were often venues where young Communist workers quarrelled and fought against the military personnel relaxing there.<sup>19</sup> It was against this background that news about Korea started to filter through.

Jacques Duclos (1896-1975), one of the top ranking PCF (French Communist Party) leaders at the time,<sup>20</sup> wrote in his autobiography how the information

---

16. AN (French National Archives) 4 AG /4, Procès-verbal du Conseil des Ministres (Join Ministers Meeting), August 22, 1950.

17. On the organization of the French unit, as well as on the start of its participation in war, see for instance Kenneth. E., Hamburger, *Leadership in the Crucible: The Korean War battles of Twin Tunnels & Chipyong-ni* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003).

18. The revival of the German Army, in spite of being under Allied Command was a cause of worry for both the French Communists and the French Army highest officers, who worried about the risks of an uncontrolled German Army, even integrated in the emerging NATO.

19. The PCF criticized violently the war in Indochina, especially through Communist Trade Unions like the CGT (Confédération générale du Travail).

20. Maurice Thorez, the then General Secretary of PCF, sick at that time, was in Moscow for treatment.

reached him in the small city of Tournon, where he had to make a speech. Even though he had no clear knowledge of the situation, he stated that on June 17, John Foster Dulles had inspected the South Korean troops near the 38th parallel, a fact, says Duclos, which was “sufficiently significant in itself to prove American bad intentions.” Moreover, on June 25, the South Korean president, Syngman Rhee (Yi Sŭngman), had announced that his troops had entered North Korean territory. In his memoirs, Duclos wrote clearly that the presentation of the facts was later modified, in order to explain why the South Korean army was defeated and routed, and why Seoul was lost.<sup>21</sup>

Though Jacques Duclos wrote his memoirs in the 1970s, he laid undue emphasis on what he claimed were Yi Sŭngman’s declarations and on the sheer coincidence of Foster Dulles’ visit to South Korea some days before the outbreak of the war in order to prove his opinions. Thus we observe that his views of the event did not change even after an interval of twenty years, which proves in addition that he had no clear knowledge of what had really happened there.

He continues: “So began a war that will last for long years and show the Americans that their power is limited.” Jacques Duclos also criticized President Auriol’s attitude towards the UN and especially France’s relation to the latter, trying to make a laughing stock out of the French President, who was an old political foe. The communist attitude can be summarized as violent criticism, facile joking, presentation of “facts” without any real basis and depending mostly on specious arguments. In reality, in spite of violent criticism and virulent actions, the PCF was losing its influence,<sup>22</sup> except in what they had to say in favour of the peace, of the necessity of maintaining peace at any cost, etc. which represented therefore the main source of public sympathy for the Party.

---

21. Jacques Duclos, *Mémoires*, t. IV: *Sur la Brèche, 1945-1952: Des débuts de la IVe République au ‘complot’ des pigeons* (Paris: Fayard, Coll. les Grandes Etudes Contemporaines, 1971), 295.

22. In September 1944, *L’Humanité* was the first French daily newspaper, with a circulation of 289,414 copies, and increased its publication to 450,000 in the beginning of 1947; it was thus the newspaper with the highest circulation in Paris and its surrounding region. However, due to the Cold War ideological crystallization, *L’Humanité* could not adapt its policy to a public more and more reluctant to accept its propaganda, so that the circulation fell down to 289,000 in 1948, and reached only 123,000 in 1955. See C. Beuvain, “*L’Humanité* dans la guerre froide: la bataille pour la paix à travers les dessins de presse,” *Cahiers d’histoire* 92 (2003), special issue “*L’Humanité*, la guerre et la paix (1904-2004).”

### 3. *Left Wing Newspapers' Opinion*

A reading of the Communist newspapers is very useful to understand how the Communist propaganda used fears of a new war, of alleged US imperialism, of the alleged use of germ warfare by the United States to mobilize their supporters and sympathisers while influencing public opinion. Since the leftwing newspapers expressed colorful and violent feelings against US imperialism, praising the triumphant advance of the North Korean forces, I focused on the most vehement and easily observable opinion expressed in these papers by fervent columnists.<sup>23</sup> Communist newspapers launched a huge campaign against the Americans and the UN. Relaying the charges broadcast from Pyongyang, they highlighted the North Korean point of view, which meant not only that it was the South that attacked the North first, but also that North Korea resisted the aggression well and, what is more, pushed back the aggressors, forcing them back south of the 38th parallel.

On July 26, 1950 the Communist newspaper *L'Humanité* presented the outbreak of war in Korea under the headline "Clear provocation of war from the puppets of Washington in Korea: the People's army strikes back victoriously against the aggression of South Korean troops," a title which, indeed, was representing a clear political position. "Extremely serious events have just unfolded in Korea, throwing a stark light on the plans and methods of American warmongers" begins André Stil. "In the night of Saturday to Sunday, the army of the Government of South Korea, headed by Syngman Rhee, puppet in the hands of the Yankees, attacked on three locations along the 38th parallel. Since this aggression came in the wake of many others, the Government of the People's Republic of North Korea warned the aggressor firmly of its intention to counter these provocations with the utmost vigour. The fighting quickly reached a peak and, according to the last news, the People's Republic Army was chasing the routed aggressor into the territory of South Korea."<sup>24</sup>

---

23. On the other hand, French right wing newspapers like *Le Figaro*, expressed of course some fears about the risk of a Third World War, but mainly critical analyses by Raymon Aron. In *Le Monde*, a mainly neutral, socialist-leaning newspaper, the reports regarding Korea were also moderate, including genuine investigative work by some reporters dispatched to Korea, and other news received from Korea, Japan, the United States, and so on. The rightwing press, and its vision of the Korean conflict, deserves a separate treatment.

24. *L'Humanité*, monday 26 June 1950. "Dans la nuit de samedi à dimanche, l'armée du gouvernement de la Corée du Sud, présidé par Syngman Rhee, fantoche aux mains des Américains, attaqua en trois points la frontière séparant la Corée du Nord et la Corée du Sud,

This “open provocation” was the “logical continuation of all the Syngman Rhee ‘government’s’ politics, or, more exactly, of the American politics in South Korea, of whom Syngman Rhee is nothing but the ghastly performer [pales executants],” remarked Andre Stil, *the* main editorialist of *L’Humanité*, trying to prove that the failing of a unified Korean state was only the result of Washington’s policy.<sup>25</sup> The very next day, again on the first page, we can read: “Korea: Washington’s puppet in utter disarray; the People’s Republic Army, chasing the aggressors, entered the capital, Seoul.”

During the two months of July and August, the communist press continuously praised the victorious advance of the North Korean forces, and enjoyed the defeat of the “fantoche de Washington” (Washington’s puppets). Also, they never changed their viewpoint that it was the South that started the war. In this connection, it is interesting to quote from another newspaper, *Démocratie Nouvelle*, which wrote, in August: “South Koreans are not deaf, they knew that something was being built in North Korea, something uneasy, but something better . . .” It continues “this was the reason why they wanted to overthrow Li Syng man, alias Syngman Rhee, in spite of his policemen and machineguns. Li Syng man and his masters<sup>26</sup> had no choice but to choose between departure and war. They preferred to risk their heads instead of losing face.” The ridiculing tone aside, *Démocratie Nouvelle* clearly thought that Yi Sŭngman would have preferred to launch a pre-emptive attack.<sup>27</sup>

To share and support his point of view, the PCF found friends in the “Comité National de l’Union des Chrétiens progressistes” (National Committee of Progressive Christians), a left-wing Christian group which protested against the American intervention in Korea, and manifested “support to the people fighting for their freedom.”<sup>28</sup> Many intellectuals followed the famous philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, completely blinded by the communist propaganda, who wrote, without a trace of irony “The Korean War is not a Communist tactic. It is the contrary. It was a trap in which the Northern armies fall . . .”<sup>29</sup>

---

suisant la ligne du 38<sup>e</sup> parallèle. Cette agression faisant suite à beaucoup d’autres, le gouvernement de la République Populaire de Corée du Nord avertit fermement l’agresseur de son intention de riposter avec la plus grande vigueur à ces provocations. Les combats prirent rapidement une grande ampleur et, aux dernières dépêches, l’armée de la République Populaire poursuivait l’agresseur en déroute jusque sur le territoire de la Corée du Sud.”

25. Cf. Hu Hung-lick, *Le Problème coréen* (Paris: Éditions A. Pedone, 1953), chap. VII.

26 I.e. the Americans.

27. Quoted in Pierre Rigoulot & Illios Yannakakis, “Les Archives soviétiques et la guerre de Corée,” *Les Cahiers d’Histoire Sociale* 7 (fall-winter 1996), 53.

28. *Ibid.*, 53-54.

From January 1950, the PCF engaged itself in a peace movement, especially through the “Stockholm Call” (l’appel de Stockholm), a movement aimed at banning nuclear weapons.<sup>30</sup> Through intense propaganda and the collection of signatures, the PCF claimed 14 million people had signed the petition in its favour,<sup>31</sup> although in reality it collected no more than 12 million signatures. Moreover, after the Truman declaration of November 1950, and the allusion of the possible use of nuclear weapons against the Chinese volunteer Army, the PCF interpreted the fact that President Truman eventually did not use the A bomb in Korea as a great victory of the so-called “peace fighters,” explaining that the petition against the Atomic Bomb (Stockholm Call) in itself prevented Washington from using retaliation weapons: “The atomic war was repelled because 500 million men and women<sup>32</sup> expressed the urgent necessity of the universal consciousness.”<sup>33</sup> Of course, the PCF could not admit that this action had been in vain, and had to satisfy its militants by demonstrating how successful its action was. This strategy worked well, as innumerable peace workers were fully convinced that their action, in Western Europe and especially in France, influenced Washington’s decision makers to abandon nuclear plans!

The whole Communist press, throughout the war, made vigorous attacks against American policy in Korea, reaching a peak in May 1952, alleging that the US Air Force had dropped bacteriological bombs over North Korea against “unarmed civilians.” This propaganda campaign was quite successful in France, as on May 28 1952, a huge protest march organized by the PCF turned into a riot, when militants armed with clubs and stones attacked the police forces. Many participants were arrested, and Jacques Duclos, mentioned

---

29. M.A. Burnier, *Les existentialistes et la politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), quoted in P. Rigoulot & I. Yannakakis, “Les Archives soviétiques et la guerre de Corée,” 53. See also Chông Myöngghan, J.F. Sirinelli et al., *P’irangsu chisikim-tül kwa Han’guk chônjaeng* [The French intellectuals and the Korean War] (Seoul: Minumsa, 2004).

30. At that time the USSR had just successfully tested its own bombs, but had a limited number of bombs in comparison with the United States.

31. Some Christians and other pacifists also participated into this movement, though they did not share at all the Marxist views. The whole campaign, all around the world, and especially in the Communist countries, allegedly got about 500 millions of signatures, of whom the PCF claimed 14 million signatures. 12 million seems more plausible, according to Y. Santamaria, *Le Parti de l’ennemi? – Le parti communiste français dans la lutte pour la paix (1947-1958)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006), 160.

32. People opposing the Atomic Bomb who had supposedly signed the Stockholm Call all around the world, and especially in the Soviet Union and its satellite states.

33. *Action*, January 15, 1951.

above, being in a car near the place where violent incidents had occurred, was arrested and put in jail under the accusation of “plotting against national security.” However, due to the strength of the communist party<sup>34</sup> at the time, and because of the lack of sufficient evidence, he was released soon after, although some politicians demanded firmly that the Communist Party be banned.

With the May riots, the confiscation of certain communist newspapers on various occasions and some sabotage affairs, we may say that France was very near what I call a kind of “Cold Civil War,” which, fortunately, never became hot. The PCF maintained for a long time the thesis of the southern aggression in Korea. In an incoherent paper, published years later, in July, 1990, *L'Humanité* stuck to its position, asserting that: “In June 1950, the U.S. troops, with the participation of contingents coming from Western states, amongst which France, invaded the North,”<sup>35</sup> which is not a historical truth, as there were no French troops in Korea in June 1950.

#### *4. General De Gaulle's Comments*

On the other end of the political spectrum, General De Gaulle, who had resigned from power in 1946, was trying to make a comeback by launching a strong, moderate rightist party, the RPF (Rassemblement du Peuple Français).<sup>36</sup> On July 12 1950, in an interview given to the United Press, De Gaulle explained that the Korean events represented “an alarm signal sounding around the world.” According to the former head of the Free French Government, the USSR vied for the establishment of its world hegemony, with the help of local communist parties in other countries and taking advantage of an anti-colonial movement, in Indochina, Burma, Tibet and Korea, just like it had done shortly before in Iran and Greece. De Gaulle said further that Moscow was probably capable of doing the same in other countries too.

---

34. Though the PCF lost some influence, in the 1951 Parliamentary elections the Party obtained 4,910,547 votes, representing in itself 25.9% of all votes, while De Gaulle's RPF only got 21.7%. The so-called Third Force (Troisième force), a coalition of leftists and centrists (SFIO's Socialists, plus moderate and MRP) gained 51.0% of the votes, collecting 9,659,198 ballot papers. At the time, the Communists had 103 seats in the Assembly. See Jean-Jacques Becker, *Histoire politique de la France depuis 1945* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2008).

35. *L'Humanité*, July 7, 1990.

36. In the legislative elections of 1946, the Gaullist Union got only 3% of the total votes, which was equivalent to, 585,439 voices. By contrast in 1951, in the new legislative elections, the newly Founded RPF got 21% of the vote, representing more than 4 million ballots, which allowed the RPF to enter Parliament.

For General De Gaulle, “these local actions were preparatory tests and movements in order perhaps to prepare for the ‘great shock’ of a final push through Europe. Of course, Europe was a central pivotal region to complete the unification of the Eurasian sphere under Soviet domination, with the loss of freedom as a consequence. On the contrary, if Western Europe could stand valiantly, then, with or without war, the ‘free world’ will eventually dictate the peace,” thought the General.<sup>37</sup> De Gaulle pointed out that the American involvement in the Korean War was clearly showing that Washington will not only use its financial support and propaganda capability, but also, for the first time in the Cold War, would shed its own blood.

General De Gaulle reminded also that the fighting France was already engaged in in Indochina from 1946 was a part of this struggle against Soviet hegemony. Moreover, De Gaulle thought that nuclear weapons were not sufficient in themselves, as the Indochina and Korean cases tended to prove. Consequently it was not acceptable that the United States had only a dozen divisions for its home defence as well as in the rest of the World, that France did not even have six to do something, and that Great Britain cannot deploy more than two on the mainland. Under these conditions of extreme weakness, the question was raised as to how Europe could be protected in the face of the Soviet military power, which was supposed be able to mobilize about 175 fully equipped divisions?

De Gaulle advocated re-armament, and expressed fears as far as NATO was concerned, worrying that the French Army would be dissolved and turned into something he called “machinery without fatherland” (“une machinerie apatriote”), in an obvious distrust of NATO.

If France was attacked for instance tomorrow, she cannot get any direct help but can expect to receive nothing but absurdly insufficient help. France, as it stands now, is on a very weak footing. Eventually, its own defence, and that of the French Union, would depend on foreign leaders.<sup>38</sup>

In fact, De Gaulle was clearly aiming at the elections to come, and wanted to take avail of the situation to make a great move for France in the direction of “national unity and renovation.”<sup>39</sup> On August 12, 1950, De Gaulle again wrote, in a press release: “The storm is coming. The Korean War is the first

---

37. *Le Monde*, July 13, 1950.

38. *Le Monde*, July 13, 1950.

39. *Le Monde*, July 13, 1950.

signal. Everyone can guess that one day or another the aggression could be directed against Europe and against France.” Nevertheless, De Gaulle hastily softened this deadly alarm:

However, the Soviets are taking advantage of our weakness, our cowardice, and the dispersions of other [Powers]. The Free Nations would be in a situation to impose peace as soon as they rise and stand up. We, France, let’s show the way. In spite of the loss suffered [in Indochina and during the past War], the efforts to be achieved are not beyond the nation’s capability. Notwithstanding, in the present situation, we cannot put up anything but a ridiculously weak defence.<sup>40</sup>

De Gaulle thus sought to exploit the “coming storm” blowing from Korea to find his way to power again and to use that as a platform for rebuilding the French nation. In those days, the wounds of the Second World War were still visible. The threats from abroad were huge, and the French army, with its best men already engaged in the Indochina War, was still weak, lacking in tanks, artillery and manpower. In fact, the Korean crisis deepened the fears of a communist attack in Europe itself, giving thereby an impulse to the building of a strong French army, which Jules Moch and René Pleven, the then head of the French Defence Board and the Prime minister respectively, were going to organize in a big way in the following months.

### *5. French Perceptions of Korea*

What did the French people really know about Korea in 1950? Only few scholars, a small number of journalists and, of course, Catholic missionaries knew something about the country. The following sources provide a better idea of the level of ignorance. “Korea? Who in 1950 knew what Korea could be? Some people were confusing Korea with Morea, an ancient part of Greece. A simple, good-hearted mother of one of the French soldiers engaged in the French Army UN Battalion came even to think, on hearing the radio broadcasts, that war had broken out in Corrèze,<sup>41</sup> where her grandsons had been sent for holidays, and was worrying much for them,”<sup>42</sup> wrote Michel Rossi, adding ironically, however, that even such kind of thoughts were rather strange and incomprehensible; for how could it be possible that North Corrèze had attacked South Corrèze?

---

40. *L'Année politique*, 1950, p. 295.

41. Corrèze is a province (département) in the center of France.

42. Michel Rossi, *Avoir vingt ans à Chipyong-ni* (Courbevoie: Remicom, 1994), 51.

At the same time, the French satirical newspaper *Le Canard enchaîné* published several articles and comic strips regarding fictional invasions such as “Polrénia invades South Corrèze.” It could be noted, also, that the same confusion was observed in almost the same manner in some other European countries, even in England.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, even in the French Army, very few officers knew anything about Korea, though they had sometimes observed the geographical situation of Korea on maps of the Far East. Though Korea was better known to French military circles in the years of the Boxer Uprising (1900) or during the Russo-Japanese war, the French Army had forgotten Korean geographical features, especially the climate, and the bitter winters of the peninsula. “We left Marseille, on December 12, in the French Army’s winter uniform. But we wore the summer dress with the colonial helmet. [It was] wonderful in the Red Sea [but] north of Manila, we started getting difficulties. We were freezing, it was very uncomfortable,” recounts André Besamat.<sup>44</sup>

However, some educated people, like Barthélémy,<sup>45</sup> who would become general later, remembered lectures in political science that he attended at the Paris Institute of Politics (IEP) in the years 1938-1939, where André Siegfried dealt with “an uprising against the Japanese and the proclamation of a Provisional Government of Korean inside the French concession in Shanghai in 1919.”<sup>46</sup> However, this was an exception.<sup>47</sup> Even in 1952, though many articles had been published in newspapers and magazines, nobody knew the exact location of Korea on a map. Of course, most of them knew that Korea could be somewhere near China and Japan, though the average French gentleman of that time did not have any clear knowledge thereof as he was not that much interested in the external world, especially when he was living in the countryside or in small cities.

The French historian Alain Ruscio pointed out that, regarding the Indochina War, very few people in France showed really profound interest in it, even though news about the war was regularly published in the newspapers.<sup>48</sup> We can therefore understand that if Indochina did not pique the interest of the

---

43. Brian Catchpole, *The Korean War* (London: Robinson, 2001), 264.

44. Personal Interview, December 8, 2001.

45. He was a major in the UN French Battalion during the first year of the Korean War.

46. Cf. Maurice Barthélémy, “Corée, une guerre oubliée,” *Floréal An X*, 72 (hiver 2001), 54. It worth noting that Pr. Siegfried knew the March 1 Movement and some of its consequences.

47. Personal Interview, October 2001.

48. Alain Ruscio, *La Guerre française d’Indochine* (Bruxelles: Complexe, 1992).

average French,<sup>49</sup> it is hardly surprising that Korea raised no sustained interest either, apart from the beginning of the war in the summer of 1950, when a serious alarm was sounded.

Despite this general situation, it should also be remarked that in the beginning of the war some French people wanted to help Korea, though unfortunately there is no way to find out who exactly these people really were. On September 13, 1950, the Korean Embassy in Paris wrote to General Monclar, the Commander of the UN French Battalion especially created to participate in the Korean War, that the Korean Ambassador had already received about 20,000 letters of French People proposing to help Korea.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, till today, nobody found any of these letters, which could have given valuable material for researchers.<sup>51</sup>

Many of these letters were probably written by people out of sympathy to a small country which seemed under the attack of the Soviet Union, but a good number of these letters came perhaps from the conservative groups involved in collaboration a few years before with the Nazi regime, and were therefore looking for occasions to change their image of collaborators. It was therefore impossible to recruit them in the French UN battalion, due to the French military regulations of 14 March 1949.<sup>52</sup> Whereas France was unable to man and equip a full infantry regiment or a brigade to be sent to Korea, the same France would not recruit people who wanted to help, even though most of them were fiercely anti-communist.

The French people had various reactions when they heard about the War in Korea, when they came to know the exact geographical position of Korea and what the stakes of that new war could be. Since newspapers were perhaps not read by very many Frenchmen at that time, especially regarding what was happening in the Far East, it is very difficult to analyze fears, hopes or indifferences raised up by the news coming from Korea. Fortunately, the first

---

49. "In May 1953, out of the people having declared to read one or more newspapers, 22% confessed they 'never' read news from Indochina, and 48% answered that they followed 'sometimes' these news stories, so that only the remaining 30% went through the Far Eastern events on a regular base." (Alain Ruscio, *La Guerre française d'Indochine*, 94).

50. SHD(T) (French Military Archives), 7 U 290.

51. In the same way, the American Embassy in Paris received a few dozen of letters from peoples eager to join the US Army and fight against North Korea. See P. Rigoulot, *La guerre de Corée, image et implications politique*, DEA, Post-Master Memoir, EHESS, Paris, 1990, quoted in Y. Santamaria, *Le parti de l'ennemi? Le parti communiste dans la lutte pour la paix*, 137.

52. SHD(T), box. 7 U 290, documents of April 1951. Concerning the French "traitors" who fought against the Soviet Union in Nazi uniform, see P. Giolitto, *Volontaires français sous l'uniforme allemande* (Paris: Tempus, 2007).

opinion studies held at the time offer good data to analyze the reactions and thoughts of the people on the subject.

### French Public Opinion

In July, the people of Belgium were seized by a kind of panic: food items for daily consumption like oil, sugar, flour, or dried beans suddenly disappeared from most of the shops. The same phenomenon was seen in France, and many of the groceries in Paris suffered sudden shortage of food articles and other things of daily use, such as soap, flour, and canned food like sardines.<sup>53</sup> However, this reaction was one of the very few consequences of the Korean War noticeable in France. Most of the people did not pay that much attention to this remote land. The only important question was whether there would be war between the Soviet Union and the United States, and the possibility of France's decision to side with the USA in that case.

From 1945, the IFOP, the newly established French Institute of Opinion Studies, proceeded regularly to conduct polls on the fears of a new war. As early as December 1945, the French public was seriously worrying about a New World War. Though the part of the worrying people decreased gradually before coming down to 14% in April 1949, it went up again in August the

**Table 1.** Risks of a new world war<sup>54</sup>

	December 1945	December 1946	July 1947	March 1948	April 1949	August 1950
Think a new war could burst out within 5 years	50	42	35	39	14	34
Don not think so	27	28	35	31	52	31
Do not know exactly	23	30	30	30	34	35
	100	100	100	100	100	100

53. *Newsweek*, August 14, 1950. See also a report from the Prefect of the Lower Seine Region (Département de Seine inférieure, August, 18th, 1950, mentioned by Yves Santamaria (*Le parti de l'ennemi*, 134).

54. *Sondages*, n° 1, 1951, 8. The communist propaganda exploited skillfully these fears of Third World War. Propaganda posters and cartoons were distributed through various ways in 1951 under this theme, often under the shape of a pieta-like woman embracing a dead child with ruins, and sometimes flames, in the background.

same year, probably in the face of apparent incapacity of the United States to contain or curb communism on the Cold War battlefields.

In spite of this, the main fears usually concerned daily life. Though liberated, and in spite of the Marshall plan for reconstruction, the French economy had to be rebuilt. Unemployment was still rampant, and consequently the apprehension to be unable to feed his family, to lose his position, to be sick, was high, as shown in the next table:

**Table 2.** Evolution from 1946 of answers to the question: “What is now the most important point concerning yourself and your family?”<sup>55</sup> (%):

	January 1946	October 1946	October 1947	January 1948	March 1949	October 1949	August 1950	September 1951
Money problems	15	44	36	42	52	57	49	57
Personal problems and health problems	26	13	9	6	11	13	12	10
Economic situation	–	–	6	8	10	10	8	9
Housing problems	4	7	2	5	7	6	6	7
Uncertainty regarding future	–	–	–	–	6	6	11	6
Political situation war, peace	–	–	–	–	4	3	14	6
Food supply	49	16	35	31	–	–	–	–
Other Problems	4	14	6	6	8	2	3	1
No answer	2	6	6	2	2	3	6	4
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

The fears for the future are clearly expressed through answers such as: “future of the young generation,” “What tomorrow will be like,” “risk of unemployment,” “the situation and my children’s future,” “find another / a better job,” “That my son gets a job.” The political situation, and the war, suggested answers as clear as: “international situation,” “Korean war,” “the peace seems threatened,” “Do not risk the Atomic Bomb” or “the solution to the Korean War.”<sup>56</sup> However, this only represented 14 % of the whole opinion in August 1950, and this dropped to only 6% in September 1951, with the stabilization of the “main line of resistance” in Korea.

This emotive perception of the international situation was strengthened by the conviction that in case of a World War between the United States and the

55. *Sondages*, n° 1, 1951 et n° 3, 1951.

56. *Sondages*, n° 1, 1951, 9.

USSR, France could not remain neutral in any way, an opinion widely shared by citizens of all political persuasions.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, in case of war between the superpowers, most of the French people (78%) thought that “France would be drawn into the conflict.”

Though the official dogma of the Communist Party (PCF) was that “French people won’t go to war against the USSR,”<sup>58</sup> the truth was very different. A report from the Foreign Office pointed out that in fact one of the most attractive aspects of the Communist Party, save the social claims of full employment and higher salaries, was the defence of the Peace (32%). Besides, in case of war between the USA and the USSR, “only 20% of the Communist militants would join the Soviet side.”<sup>59</sup> The Korean shock of the summer of 1950 was tremendous enough to warrant a special Gallup poll regarding the Korean War. Noteworthy, the French people did not consider the Korean conflict as a local or isolated event, but as an episode of a wider, and consequently more hazardous, conflict.

A majority or 15% of French people assessed that the Soviet Union was responsible, while 8% thought the United States were guilty. All the same, the high number of people who were unable to answer (28%) also needs to be pointed out. In August 1950, about half of the public thought that the Korean crisis had heightened the risks of war. On the contrary, from August to October, the military events, like the quick liberation of South Korea, deeply

**Table 3.** Answers given to the question “How do you understand the Korean War?”<sup>60</sup>:

An episode of the struggle between the USA and the USSR	24%
USSR is responsible	15%
USA is responsible	8%
A prelude to, a diplomatic crisis, a material improvement	8%
The beginning of WW III	5%
A local war	9%
Other answers: (gun sellers, like Spanish War, etc.)	3%
No idea	28%
	100%

57. *Sondages*, n° 1, 1951, 9

58. Y. Santamaria, *Le parti de l'ennemi?*, 76.

59. British Foreign Office, “Chancery to Western Department,” June 7, 1952, quoted in Y. Santamaria, *Le parti de l'ennemi?*, 186.

60. *Sondages*, n° 1, 1951, 11.

Table 4. "The Korean War has:"

	AUGUST 1950	OCTOBER 1950
Deepened war risks	49%	25%
Softened war risks	10%	28%
Kept the equality of risk	24%	30%
Do not know	17%	17%
	100	100

impressed the French public opinion.<sup>61</sup> Despite the summer defeats, the victorious campaign of the UN Army in South Korea in September and October, before the Chinese intervention, brought admiration and assuaged many apprehensions.<sup>62</sup> Within two months, a sudden change in the public opinion was observable to this effect.

These feelings, of course, would have to be clarified according to the political allegiance of the questioned people.<sup>63</sup> Since the US intervention in Korea turned into a UNO "police operation," it is important to see how the UN, which was scarcely referred to before the Korean conflict, gets suddenly

Table 5. Perception of the UN action

	July 1947	September 1948	October 1950
Like the UN action	9%	13%	49%
Dislike UN action	30%	36%	18%
Do not know	61%	51%	33%
	100%	100%	100%

"The role of the UN in the Korean affair:<sup>64</sup>

Played a useful role	40%
Played a negative	11%
Was useless	22%
Do not Know	27%
	100%

61. *Sondages*, n° 1 1951, 13.

62. Unfortunately, no specific polls were made concerning the Chinese intervention in the Korean crisis, so it is not possible to draw any sketch of the perception of this unexpected development.

63. *Sondages*, n° 1 1951, 12.

64. *Ibid.*

approved, due to the positive role of the organisation in the major international crises.<sup>65</sup>

The UN proved its existence, and played a “positive and useful role,” (14% of the answers among the 40% in favor): “The UN assessed his capabilities and the strength of UN’s resolutions.” “It is a huge moral force, which proved useful” ...<sup>66</sup> For 10% of the interrogated people, the UNO was also successful in stopping Communist expansionism, thus avoiding a general outburst” (8%).<sup>67</sup> From the side of UN detractors, some people (7%) considered that the UN was only a figure-head of the United States, for “The Americans are controlling the UN,” they say. Some people also thought that, in fact, the Korean conflict was purely internal, and that UN should not intervene in the internal affairs of any nation (3%).<sup>68</sup>

However, there is no doubt that, after the 1950 summer alarms and the resurgence of Yellow Peril<sup>69</sup> fears with the Chinese winter offensive of 1950-1951, the difficulties of daily life, French political arguments, Germany’s rearmament, were topics far more important for the average Frenchmen. Korea was too remote, too unknown, while other clashes appeared closer to France, in Egypt, in Iran, and also, probably more worryingly, in French-administrated territories like Tunisia and especially Morocco. No specific Gallup poll regarding the peninsular conflict was made in 1952 and 1953, thus reflecting the increasing lack of interest in Korea and the emergence of new national or international problems and topics

## Conclusion

Finally, the Korean War was also an opportunity to build a stronger West European Defence, through the rearmament of France and Western Europe. The plan was to build about a dozen French army full equipped new divisions, as a French contribution to the building of an ambitious western European defence force of fifty divisions, but also to prevent a too strong militarization of Germany through the worrying resurgence of a German Army.

---

65. *Sondages*, n° 1 1951, 14.

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Sondages*, n° 1, 1951, 14.

68. *Sondages*, n° 1, 1951, 14.

69. This expression was invented by the Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1900, in the beginning of the Boxers’ uprising in China.

The Korean Conflict also gave ammunition for the political debate inside France. Each political group found in the Korean War opportunities to develop some arguments to prove its own views. The PCF, which had launched an intensive propaganda campaign to promote a ban on the atomic bomb, tried for instance to demonstrate how successful the Stockholm Call campaign was, in collecting not only twelve million signatures but beyond, in preventing the United States to use its nuclear weapons during the Korean conflict.<sup>70</sup>

Of course, the ghosts and scars of the Second World War, the tremendous experience of war and foreign occupation, explained the changing perceptions of a public opinion besieged by communist propaganda, fears of a Third World War and the risks of atomic bombings over France by the United States in case of a Soviet Invasion and occupation of Western Europe. Thus the PCF displayed skill in manipulating the French people's common fears, while the anguish was deepened by the proximity of the World War and its traumas, including the massive air bombing against Normandy's cities and harbours on the eve of D-Day. From 1947 to 1952, we can say that France was on the brink of a major crisis with a situation looking like a "Cold civil War" or "low intensity civil war" made of political agitation, strikes and economic paralysis,<sup>71</sup> riots and sometimes sabotage in the defence industry. The French government was wise enough to abandon the temptation to forbid the PCF, thereby probably avoiding a real civil war.

To conclude, the Korean War was politically exploited by all political actors in France; by the Cabinet, in order to obtain the assistance of the United States in Indochina, and to build anew a strong defence capability; and by the political parties, to mobilize their militants or to lure sympathizers on their side. Though Korea did not represent by itself a major stake for France, the consequences of a possible communist victory in Asia and in Europe naturally raised fears, though the panic seen by some observers was short-lived. Eventually, one of the most important consequences of the war was that, by sending a French army battalion to Korea through the UN, the Plevin Cabinet not only strengthened the solidarity between Paris and Washington, thus

---

70. See Y. Santamaria, *Le Parti de l'ennemi?*, 160. See also Beuvain, "L'Humanité dans la guerre froide."

71. Just after the War, the communist Party was very strong, alongside with Communist Trade Unions. In 1947, the Socialist government faced a huge strike, especially in the coal mines of Northern France. Though socialist, the Minister of the Interior, Jules Moch, took drastic measures, sending 60,000 policemen and soldiers against the 15,000 strikers entrenched in the mine wells, forcing them to go back to work, despite the death of five workers. About 2,000 workers were fired.

allowing the re-building of a strong French Army in Europe, but also deepened the bilateral relations with Korea, since the two Republics were now tied by a new brotherhood in arms which contributed mainly to enhance and developed till the present economic and cultural relations.