

Spring 2015

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## Recommended Citation

Lutz, Tyler, "Cult of Personality: North Korea under Kim Il-Sung" (2015). *Senior Capstone Theses*. Paper 10.

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Tyler Lutz

History Senior Seminar

Senior Thesis Paper

**Cult of Personality: North Korea under Kim Il-Sung**

North Korea, The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or "The Hermit Kingdom" as it is occasionally referred to, is the most isolated country in the world today. Its people have lived under the dictatorial rule of the world's only dynastic communist regime, that of the Kim family for over half a century. The country is highly militaristic, highly idealistic, and always appears to be on the edge of instigating a new conflict in the region. The country itself is relatively young, having only split from the South immediately following World War II. Up until that point, Korea had been a unified nation for over 1100 years. Their history was for the most part peaceful and stable, until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when increasing pressures from the West and the Japanese forced Korea to open up to the world. In 1910, Korea was formally annexed by Japan and remained under their control until the Allied victory in 1945. At that point, Korea's history as a unified nation would come to an end, with both halves taking drastically different paths to independence. So, how did the North evolve into the reclusive and mysterious nation we know today? What factors caused it to embrace communism so adamantly? How did its founding leader, Kim Il-Sung, establish himself as a demigod in society? The goal of this paper is to explain the origin, establishment, and early years of the North Korean regime under its founding ruler, Kim Il-Sung. The process by which both communism and Kim Il-Sung rose to power in Korea was a combination of foreign influences, shrewd political manipulation, and a bit of luck, rather than a "glorious revolutionary struggle", as put forth by North Korean state media.

The concept of a "cult of personality" is not unique to North Korea, Asia, communism, or the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "A personality cult comes into being when a one-man dictatorship presents itself as a democracy. The goal is to convey the impression that due to the ruler's unique qualifications and the unanimity of the people's love for him, his rule constitutes the perfect fulfillment of democratic ideals."<sup>1</sup> Although Kim Il-Sung's personality cult has grown over time

to be one of, if not, the most prolific and fanatical in history, many other heads of state have shared a similar following. Other communist leaders, mainly Vladimir Lenin, Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong, were revered by their people as heroes and revolutionaries. Fascists like Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini both had a cult-like following in their respective countries. Worship of leaders dates back to ancient times when Emperors and Kings of many nations, like Japan, the Aztecs, and Egypt, were revered by their people as semi-divine beings. However, the level of adoration and respect that the Kim family commands is beyond what any ancient Emperor could have achieved. The cult of the Kim family is pervasive in the lives of every North Korean: everywhere they go, they are reminded of the greatness of their leaders and all the wonderful things they have done for the people. They are reminded of the terrors that exist outside their socialist paradise of a nation, and that imperialist powers like Japan and the United States will stop at nothing to destroy their way of life.

When trying to explain North Korea in comparative terms, there are a few different ways one can define the regime. One approach is to label the North Korean state and Kim Il-Sung as a continuation of the dynastic monarchy that had existed in Korea prior to annexation by Japan. Korea had always had a king or queen as the ruler of their nation since ancient times and democracy was a very foreign concept. One could view Kim's regime after 1945 as resembling a dynastic monarchy, particularly because his son and his grandson have succeeded him. However, Kim's power was far greater than a traditional monarch. He achieved near absolute executive and military authority in North Korea for almost half a century, far more than was possible during the time of the monarchy. So, this approach does not take into account the influence communism had on Kim and North Korea. Collectivization of farms, nationalization of all industries, and the introduction of the party congress as the primary means of administration

were all features of Korea that were not present prior to Kim's rise to power in the late 1940's. Of course this was largely encouraged by the Soviet advisors and military leaders present in the country at that time.

Another method to explain Kim's reign is to look at him as a communist dictator comparable to Lenin, Stalin or Mao. There is no doubt Kim called himself a communist and believed his actions were designed to establish communism in North Korea; he had even risked his life and endured impossible hardships while fighting on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party in Manchuria. Based on my research, I believe Kim was genuine about his commitment to communism, but only as a means to achieve Korean independence: he was first and foremost a nationalist. His dream was to unite the two Koreas under the banner of communism, which ultimately failed with the signing of the armistice following the Korean War.

The third approach to explain the North Korea under Kim is to label it a totalitarian regime. Despite what their propaganda may proclaim to the rest of the world and even their own people, North Korea is a one-party government that attempts to completely control the lives of its citizens and ruthlessly subjugates anyone who opposes it. As noted above, while Kim was alive, he had unlimited power to do as he pleased. Particularly after the purges of the 1960's, there were no politicians or influential people of any kind that could challenge Kim's position. It was during this time that the cult of personality around Kim emerged and his life began to be deified in North Korean culture. However, totalitarian states typically are not governed by a series of rulers who are the direct heirs of the previous ruler.

It is apparent that no single explanation is completely satisfactory. I believe all three arguments have relevant points and succeed in explaining certain aspects of the North Korean

regime, but none of them are entirely correct. Instead, it's more accurate to say that a combination of the three is the best way to explain the unique characteristics of North Korea and the nature of Kim Il-Sung's rule.

### **Fact vs. Fiction: North Korea through propaganda**

The propaganda apparatus in North Korea was first organized in 1946. Called the North Korean Federation of Literature and Art, this institute would become the engine behind Kim's cult of personality. Many of the artists and writers who were brought in had been collaborators with the Japanese during the war to fabricate pro-colonial publicity. While most collaborators would eventually be killed or deported, those with experience in the art of propaganda were put to use.<sup>2</sup> When the Japanese first occupied Korea, they set about creating their own cultural apparatus to create propaganda designed to show Koreans and Japanese as a united nation. Before this, Koreans for the most part had little concept of nationalism or being overtly proud of their country. The Japanese propagated the idea that the Koreans were part of the "imperial race" and shared an ancient bloodline with the Japanese and were therefore superior to other races. Those who had worked for the colonial propaganda apparatus during the Japanese occupation were employed to put these ideas of racial superiority and noble bloodlines to use in the post-war setting. They revived an old Korean myth about Tan'gun who was believed to have been a semi-divine being who created the first Korean Kingdom in 2333 BC. They also claimed that his birthplace was Mt. Paektu, an inactive volcano on the border of Korea and China. The significance of Mt. Paektu was invented to embody the significance of Mt. Fuji in Japan; it had no importance up until this point. The purpose of this story was to separate Korea's ancient heritage from Japan's.<sup>3</sup> During his years as a soldier leading the Korean people against the Japanese, North Korean historians claim Kim operated from a base on Mt. Paektu for the entirety

of the war. Although Kim set foot in Korea only a handful of times during the war, this fabrication succeeded in connecting him to the legend of Tan'gun.

Even though the story of Tan'gun had been widely ignored since the middle ages, many in the North came to believe it as fact in a very short time period.<sup>4</sup> The concept of racial purity evolved into the idea that the Korean people were inherently virtuous, peaceful, and morally pure. It is these characteristics that resulted in North Koreans seeing themselves as being a child-like race; vulnerable to the evils of the world around them because of their innocence and morality. When depicting their own people in paintings, North Korean artists make an effort to have them appear young and innocent, with child-like features. Its history, which had been overwhelmingly peaceful until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was revised to depict Koreans being exploited by foreign powers for hundreds of years, further propagating the symbolism of children being abused by adults.<sup>5</sup> Writers assert that Korea was a peaceful kingdom with bountiful resources, constantly under attack from jealous invaders. They explain the Japanese occupation by blaming their own rulers at the time for being too influenced by false religions and philosophies like Confucianism or Buddhism and also for being too willing to give into imperialist aggression.

The solution to the issue of exploitation by foreigners became apparent: the Korean people needed a strong parent leader, and Kim was ready to fill that role. At first, the artists and writers at the North Korean Federation of Literature and Art were debating about how to depict Kim Il-Sung. One school of thought sought to portray him as a strong, rough and rugged guerrilla fighter who fought the Japanese by day and read Marxist-Leninist texts by night. That is to say, a very paternal representation: a brilliant commander, brave soldier, and defender of the people. The other group showed Kim as a more nurturing individual with very maternal traits. Paintings and poems illustrate him embracing children, inspiring farmers and factory workers

with words of wisdom, or having a hearty conversation with soldiers on the frontlines. Contrary to intuition, it was this second image that stuck. Kim is still often referred to as the “Father of the People”, despite his maternal traits being played up more often than not. Ironically, while the naiveté and purity of the Korean people are a source of their vulnerability (according to their own beliefs), these same qualities give Kim his strengths: he acts as the androgynous parent of the Korean people, using his supreme compassion to both nurture and defend them. An example of this would be Kim’s supposed affection toward orphans of the Korean War. The State took these children in and taught them to think of Kim Il-Sung as their father and them as his children.<sup>6</sup>

To give Kim even more credibility, fabrications about his family history were invented as well. Kim’s parents were supposedly incredibly poor peasants and part of the anti-Japanese colonial movement. It is believed they had a major role in an underground movement to end Japanese colonialism in the 1920’s. Going even further back in his family tree, Kim’s great grandfather, Kim Ŭng-u, was reported to have led a counterattack against the USS Sherman in 1866 when it attempted to sail up the Taedong River.<sup>7</sup> Although this incident did take place, there is no proof of his great grandfather being in the area, let alone organizing the attack; it is simply another attempt to strengthen the Kim family’s tradition as fighters against imperialism.

The history of Kim Il-Sung’s life (and consequently, the history of the nation), as transcribed by propaganda writers and North Korean “historians”, is one of exaggerated claims and outlandish stories. The primary reason they were able to get away with such fantasies was because Kim had not lived in Korea since he was a child and therefore nobody could corroborate or deny any of the so-called facts that were being presented. Those who could, his guerrilla comrades, would not dream of speaking out against any inaccuracies (or outright lies) they might



have noticed, out of either blind devotion to him or fear of retribution. The most trusted artists, writers and historians were allowed to completely make up a painting, poem, etc. revolving around Kim and a certain theme. In some cases, it was apparent that the story or artwork was not meant to be historically accurate, but was instead intended to teach a certain lesson or meaning, such as stories about Jesus in the Bible.<sup>8</sup>

A summary of Kim's life according to his official biographers: Kim was born in the Man'gyŏngdae district in the ancient capital of Pyongyang on April 15, 1912. His parents were important members of the anti-Japanese movement, but were forced to move to Manchuria after police scrutiny. Kim organized and led an anti-Japanese movement of his own in his mid teens, invented North Korea's official political ideology, Juche, at the age of 18, and two years later founded the Korean People's Army, which he would lead to victory over the next few years. When his army was wavering, Kim took his troops on "The Arduous March" in the middle of winter and regrouped; waiting to strike the final blow to the Japanese (an attempt is made here to invent a Korean version of Mao Zedong's famous Long March during the Chinese civil war). That day came on August 9, 1945 when Kim marched back into Korea and fought the Japanese for six days until finally driving them out on August 15<sup>th</sup>. Before he could push further south to liberate the rest of the country, the Americans occupied it and installed a puppet leader. They launched a war of aggression in 1950, but thanks to Kim's military genius, the North survived and forced the enemy to surrender in 1953. Kim spent the next 40 years working day and night to transform his country into a socialist paradise. Touring throughout the country, Kim used his wisdom and knowledge to solve problems and offer advice to workers. He inspired farmers and factory workers with his on-the-spot guidance, and foreign emissaries came from all around the world to observe North Korea's industrial strength and to learn about Juche thought, so that they

could implement it in their own countries (no explanation is given to clarify why foreigners would come to the DPRK to learn about Juche when one of the guiding principles is that Koreans are the most superior race in the world). His tireless efforts to help his people took a toll on his health, and he passed away on July 8, 1994 to the great dismay of the nation, leaving his son Kim Jong-Il to console the grieving population and continue to lead them in the eternal struggle against imperialism.<sup>9</sup>

There is some truth to this story, but the details are grossly exaggerated and in certain areas, entirely false. If anything, these lies do more harm than good for Kim's reputation, at least from a foreign perspective. "Kim also was made out to be a great warrior and the steadfast protector of the Korean people, and was reputed to have fought one hundred thousand battles against the Japanese in ten years. Yet...if this was true, Kim would have had to engage in twenty-eight battles a day, without interruption, for each day from 1932-1941."<sup>10</sup> Nobody can deny Kim was a soldier for many years in Manchuria, fighting against the Japanese in treacherous conditions, but to assert that he was solely responsible for defeating the Japanese in Korea is absurd; he did not even return to Korea until after the war ended. Being a brave soldier and genius military strategist were not Kim's only supposed skills: "Kim was the country's leading novelist, philosopher, historian, educator, designer, literary critic, architect, industrial management specialist, general, table tennis trainer, and agricultural experimenter."<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the proclaimed ideology of the DPRK, Juche, was not actually written by Kim, but by a Korean intellectual named Hwang Chang-yŏp. Juche preaches the ideas that man is the master of his own destiny, revolutionary tactics must be modified to conform to the country they are being applied in, and the notion that Koreans are morally superior to all other races and must

be self-reliant. It is difficult to believe a man who did not finish high school could write such a political manifesto, even though the ideas are basic enough.

Kim Il-Sung gave a brief definition of Juche when answering questions for a Japanese newspaper in 1972: “In a nutshell, the idea of Juche means that the masters of the revolution and the work of construction are the masses of the people and that they are also the motive force of the revolution and the work of construction. In other words, one is responsible for one’s own destiny and one has also the capacity for hewing out one’s own destiny.”<sup>12</sup> The actual written Juche doctrine, as shown above, is repetitive, tedious, and would have been incomprehensible to the average person at the time. This was likely by design, as having ambiguity in the ideology means the regime can’t be questioned, since few North Koreans actually understand its meaning beyond the most basic concepts. As one author puts it, “It recalls a college student trying both to stretch a term paper to a respectable length and to discourage anyone from actually reading it through.”<sup>13</sup> Over a short period of time, Juche replaced any and all pre-existing religions and ideologies in the North. Several thousand Buddhist temples and Christian churches were destroyed and practitioners of these religions were arrested in large numbers. “Through destroying others, he made himself the Creator of everything material and spiritual in the North Korean state. State propaganda thereafter referred to Kim as superior to Christ in love, Buddha in benevolence, Confucius in virtue, and Mohammed in justice.”<sup>14</sup>

Some areas of history are left out entirely by the biographers and so-called historians, such as the efforts of the Americans during the Pacific Campaign of World War II; the Japanese were allegedly defeated single-handedly by Kim and his all-Korean army. There is little to no reference of the contributions of the Russians when explaining Kim’s successes, they were purely his and his alone. Additionally, the Korean War was started by the Americans, and the

Chinese intervention on behalf of the North is not talked about at all. Other areas of history are known but not discussed openly, such as the efforts of the early communist movements in Korea, despite their having an important influence on Kim's career: the failures of these movements in the 1920's were a primary factor in explaining how Kim was able to achieve power in the 1940's. The real history of communism in Korea and the life of Kim Il-Sung, while not as romantic, are nonetheless still interesting and are important when attempting to understand the regime's distinctive qualities.

From our point of view, it is easy to dismiss such stories as being ridiculous and having fairytale-like qualities. However, to the average North Korean, it would appear that such propaganda is very successful at forming their thoughts and opinions. "Nearly nine out of ten defectors today, many of whom settle in South Korea, where there are now over 21,000, still identify as 'North Korean' rather than as a 'Korean' or 'South Korean.' And 75 percent of them say they still retain affection for the Great Leader Kim Il-Sung, Dear Leader Kim Jong-Il, and the Great Successor Kim Jong-un."<sup>15</sup> This statistic is even more shocking if one assumes that, having escaped to the free world and learned the true nature of the regime they grew up in, these defectors still hang on to some level of adoration for the Kim family. This is perhaps a testament to the North's apparent success in teaching young children about the lives of their leaders. "Schoolbooks portrayed Kim in his heroic roles. Some pictured Kim's exploits, whether real or imagined, as a child and as a young guerrilla commander. Others depicted a mature Kim, sometimes surrounded by children in tableaux reminiscent of Sunday-school pictures that illustrate the words of Jesus."<sup>16</sup> Besides learning about the many laudable qualities of Kim Il-Sung in grade school, children also learn about anti-American propaganda: "North Korean schoolchildren learn grammatical conjugations of past, present, and future by reciting 'We killed

Americans,' 'We are killing Americans,' 'We will kill Americans.' They learn elementary school math with word problems that subtract or divide the number of dead American soldiers to get the solution."<sup>17</sup> Visual representations of the Kim family's deification, such as posters, murals, monuments, statues, and paintings, are also very prevalent throughout the country: over 40,000 monuments of various kinds dedicated to Kim Il-Sung existed by 1992.<sup>18</sup> All of these forms of media are designed in one way or another to remind the people of North Korea of the many wondrous things their leader has done and why they should be grateful toward him. "A recent study by the respected scholar Park Kyung-Ae found that interviews of North Korean defectors today find sentimentality expressed for the leadership even as they expressed great anger with the political system."<sup>19</sup> It would appear that even among defectors and expatriates, genuine respect or love is still felt toward Kim Il-Sung and his heirs.

### **Korean history from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century**

Korea's history as a unified nation has been characterized by stability, tradition, and homogeneity. The Korean people have long been ethnically similar, and there were no other major racial, cultural, or religious groups in the country pre-20<sup>th</sup> century. They were very isolated from the world, even within Asia: China and Japan were the only two nations Korea had diplomatic relations with until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For centuries, Korean kings worked to make Korea the greatest example of Confucian society. This sense of superiority and moral fidelity developed mainly after the Manchu invaded China in 1644 and established the Qing dynasty; although Koreans had great respect for China, the Manchu were not ethnically Chinese. As a result of this, Koreans took it upon themselves to maintain the ethics and ideals of Confucianism in their nation because they believed the Manchu were not capable of doing so in China.

Although they did not respect the Manchu as much as the Han Chinese, Korea remained in the

Qing's sphere of influence as a tributary state. However, their policy of seclusion and rejection of all things foreign would begin to change in a drastic way beginning in the 1860's, mainly due to French Jesuit missionaries entering the country illegally through China. Fearing this new Western way of thinking would corrupt the people, the government initiated a large crackdown, capturing and executing several foreign missionaries.

The monarch during this tumultuous period was the Grand Prince Yi Ha-eung, acting as the regent for his young son Yi Gojong. In an attempt to combat the religious unrest and increasing Western influence, Yi Ha-eung instituted a vigorous conservative program to reform and revitalize traditional institutions. A major part of this movement was maintaining and strengthening the strict exclusion policy and refusing all forms of diplomacy with the West. After a few brief naval skirmishes with the French and Americans in which Korea routed the Westerners, they felt confident that they were on the right path. Ultimately, it would not be a Western country that was responsible for "opening up" Korea, but instead the newly Westernized Japanese Empire.<sup>20</sup>

Japan has long had ambitions of conquering Korea, and had even tried to invade them, unsuccessfully, in the 1500's. However, the new Meiji government in Tokyo was initially against a military invasion of Korea. Instead, they followed the Western approach of forcing Korea to open its borders for the establishment of trade. Their goal behind this was to draw Korea away from its long-term ally, China, and force it to become a protectorate of Japan instead. In February of 1876, negotiations were concluded: Korea would officially become an independent state by revoking its dependent status with China. In addition, three major ports (Pusan, Inchon, and Wonsan) would be opened to Japan for trade.<sup>21</sup> Although China had formally lost its position as the protector of Korea, they maintained an active role in Korean politics under the guidance of

the Chinese statesman Li Hongzhang. Both China and Japan had troops stationed in Korea, vying for control of domestic politics. However, any attempt to influence the Korean court one way or another was met with staunch opposition by the conservative Empress Myeongseong, wife and court representative of King Gojong. Political movements eventually gravitated into two groups; the radical reformers supporting the Japanese, and the traditionalists supporting the Chinese, while the monarchy supported neither. This nationwide division hampered any attempt at modernization or diplomacy with the West to ensure sovereignty. The Japanese felt that their display of power and modern military would eventually win over the country, while China felt their historical friendship with Korea would bring them back to their side. A rebellion in 1894 caused both sides to mobilize their armies in the country, resulting in the Sino-Japanese War.<sup>22</sup>

The war was over in one year, with modern Japanese military weapons, training, and tactics winning over China's superior numbers. The peace treaty ended China's involvement in the Korean peninsula and left the fate of the country to be determined between Japan and a new competitor, the Russian Empire. Russia had their sights on Korea for many years but their interest peaked once China was out of the picture. Immediately following the war, Japanese ministers set about expelling the remaining pro-China supporters in the government as well as putting Korea on the path to modernization through radical reforms. In 1904, war broke out between Japan and Russia after a torpedo boat attack in Port Arthur, Manchuria. Only one year later in 1905, both sides met to negotiate peace. The Treaty of Portsmouth recognized Japan's interest in Korea, and Russia was forced to concede. Korea was now an official protectorate of Japan and was under the administration of the Japanese Resident-General Ito Hirobumi.<sup>23</sup> Ito's original plan for creating a benevolent relationship between the two countries was met with hostility and widespread riots and rebellions. As a result, military force was used to crush the

rebellions, killing around 12,000 people in one year.<sup>24</sup> General opposition to Japanese occupation by most Koreans, as well as acts of violence and the murder of Ito by a Korean patriot in 1909, convinced the Emperor and his advisors that complete annexation and institution of martial law was the best way to govern the Korean peninsula.<sup>25</sup>

The situation for many Koreans on the peninsula in 1910 was bleak; the past 40 years had been a combination of war, rebellion, and occupation. In the time span of only one generation, the country was forcefully opened up to the world after centuries of isolation. The annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910 brought with it a large exodus of Koreans to Russia and Manchuria. Those who fled to Russia were welcomed with open arms by the Bolsheviks who sympathized with them over their mutual hatred of Japan.<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that a previous mass departure of Koreans to Russia took place in the 1870's due to famine. Having been in Russia for about one generation, the majority of Koreans present in Russia before 1910 had well-established roots and were not as zealous to liberate Korea as those who came after the Japanese occupation. The Bolsheviks offered better social and economic conditions for the immigrants, as well as their new ideology of communism, which some Koreans embraced not as a political ideology but as a means of rallying and unifying other exiled Korean nationals.

### **Early Korean communist movements**

The first important Korean political figure to embrace communism was Yi Tong-Hwi. Yi was an ex-Army major and had been travelling between Russia and Manchuria since 1911. He established the Korean Socialist Party (KSP) in 1918 with the help of a Bolshevik who went by the name of Krepnov (no first name given). For the next year, Yi and his advisors worked closely with Krepnov to recruit other Koreans in Russia. One of the largest communities of exiled



Koreans was in the port city of Vladivostok. However, they were not interested in the ideals of communism and were instead more focused on sending representatives to the West to plead for Korea's independence. Frustrated by the nationalists' lack of enthusiasm in Vladivostok as well as the unexpected death of Krepnov in 1919, Yi Tong-Hwi and most of his advisors and officers relocated to Shanghai to participate in the newly formed Korean Provisional Government.<sup>27</sup>

Around the same time, another group of Korean exiles in the city of Irkutsk in Siberia formed the Irkutsk Communist Party headed by Nam Man-Ch'un. After establishing themselves in some surrounding cities, they reformed into the Irkutsk Group (IG). Almost immediately after their formation, disagreements between the KSP and IG emerged. The IG accused the KSP of simply using communism, and the money they were receiving from Russian Cominterns, as a means of funding their nationalist activities rather than actually trying to promote and establish communism in Korea.<sup>28</sup> This was mainly because the IG was made up of Russian-Koreans, that is, the descendents of the Koreans who had come to Russia before 1910. Most were born and raised in Russia and spoke fluent Russian and as a result they felt a closer connection to communism. The KSP was primarily formed from Korean refugees who had arrived in Russia after 1910, and therefore they had stronger feelings about Korean independence than communism.

Around 1921, Yi Tong-Hwi used his position in the Provisional Government to send a representative to Moscow to accrue support. When his agent returned with 400,000 rubles, Yi was convinced it was time to abandon the Provisional Government and reconnect with his supporters in the KSP. On January 10, 1921, Yi and his followers met in Shanghai and formed the Korean Communist Party (KCP). This party was indeed the first truly communist organization formed by Korean exiles (the Irkutsk Group was primarily Russian-Koreans). They

propagated the idea that the occupation of Korea by Japan was the result of capitalism and the bourgeois exploitation of the Korean proletariat. They sought not only to drive out the Japanese, but to establish a classless society in Korea as well. Operating out of Shanghai, this group would come to be known as the Shanghai Faction (SF). Meanwhile, the nationalists, who did not align themselves with communism, felt betrayed by the IG and SF, because while all of these groups had the same common goal of Korean independence, the IG and SF were receiving large sums of money from the Bolsheviks, and the nationalists were operating in poverty. Furthermore, pleas by nationalist representatives in the West went unheard. Their leaders were inept and they lacked any sort of foreign support. The one place where concern was voiced for the future of Korea was in Russia: Lenin acknowledged the importance of communist movements in the Far East at the Second World Congress of the Comintern in 1920.<sup>29</sup> Upon hearing how the Bolsheviks supported and endorsed the idea of Korean independence, many nationalists willingly became communists, though they still lacked a firm grasp on what Marxist-Leninist ideology was.

At this time, the Irkutsk and Shanghai organizations began increasing their efforts to send agents into Korea to spread their message and recruit more members. This was a daunting task for many reasons: they still had no reliable base of income except donations from the Russian Comintern, their numbers were still fairly low, and the Japanese police in Korea had begun to exercise a policy of strict surveillance and zero tolerance for any form of dissent. Several agents from both parties were caught and arrested from 1922 to 1923, until two party members from the Irkutsk Group successfully entered the country.<sup>30</sup> They quickly established communist cells in newspapers, school and student organizations, and labor unions. Shortly after, the Shanghai Faction established their own members and organizations centered in and around Seoul. At this point a new group of communists also gained a foothold. They were Korean students returning

from Japan who had been inspired by Japanese socialist literature and wanted to apply what they learned to their own country.

By 1925 each major communist movement was represented by an organization in Korea: Tuesday Association (TA) represented the Irkutsk Group, the Seoul Group (SG) represented the Shanghai Faction, and the Northern Wind Association (NWA) was formed from a group of Korea students returning from Japan who sought to make their own party. These groups, despite all striving for the same goal, were fierce rivals and competed for dominance in the country. The Japanese police made any activities for these three groups very difficult and only small percentages of people were able to get their hands on communist readings and propaganda. Due to limited knowledge and conflicting sources as well as the skill of the Japanese police at arresting suspected political dissidents, many Koreans had an inaccurate idea of what communism actually was.

In April of 1925, Kim Chae-Bong of the Tuesday Association brought the leaders of the three groups together in Seoul to organize a loose coalition. Surprisingly, some progress was made: several new committees, sub-organizations and departments were created and members from the three parties filled the positions somewhat equally, although members of the TA held three out of the seven positions in the Central Executive Committee, with the SG and NWA each taking two spots. With the conclusion of this meeting on April 18<sup>th</sup>, the Communist Party of Korea had been established with Kim Chae-Bong as the chairman.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, this new coalition faced the same exact problems the individual parties faced when they were separate. In a way, their union brought with it the old problems of factionalism and conflicting agendas among the higher ranks, two issues that had hindered the Korean communist movement for the past decade. Less than one week after the Communist Party of Korea was founded, the Japanese

launched an investigation into the party and its members, resulting in about thirty arrests. The coalition that had looked promising suffered a serious setback and each party resumed their own campaign but still under the name of the Communist Party of Korea. For the next several months, nothing major was accomplished by any party, and the communist movement in Korea had fallen into stagnation.

In 1927, another group of Korean students from Japan, the January Association, returned to Korea to see the communist movement in disarray. They advocated for a united front with the communists' old rivals, the nationalists. Their reasoning behind this was simple: nothing was being achieved and the Japanese had arrested and imprisoned many of the leaders and high ranking members of the various parties. The new united front, the Shinkan-hoe, established on January 14, 1927,<sup>32</sup> actually resulted in some success for the communists. This was not because the communists and nationalists worked together to achieve a common goal, but rather the various communist groups put aside their differences and joined together against the nationalists who had the most control in the party. In a way, this "united front" only succeeded in uniting the major communist parties, who would have otherwise been rivals, against their mutual enemy the nationalists.

One of the most influential communist leaders to emerge during this time was Han Wi-kōn. He outlined new goals for Korean communists in the Shinkan-hoe which were designed to place more emphasis on educating and inspiring the peasants and factory workers. His leadership helped establish a few new peasant labor unions and youth groups, but his biggest contribution was re-establishing communist power within the Shinkan-hoe, which was dominated by nationalist leaders. By the end of 1928, he was able to challenge the nationalists for leadership of the alliance.<sup>33</sup> During this time there was also an increase in Korean communists traveling to

Moscow to be educated in the ways of communist ideology as well as political and military tactics. There was also an increase in communist influence among writers, youth groups, student organizations, and peasant and worker unions. Despite these advances, a combination of low membership, lack of resources, and the relentlessness of the Japanese police made progress difficult. The unity of the Shinkan-hoe was also faltering as many communists condemned it as a bourgeois organization. The Sinkhan-hoe was essentially defunct by 1929, and in 1931 it was officially disbanded.<sup>34</sup> The Soviet Comintern also officially broke ties with the Communist Party of Korea in 1928 because they were upset with the factional divides and lack of progress. The efforts of the coalition did however succeed in planting the idea of communism in the minds of a small percentage of Korean people, mainly in and around Seoul. While some exiled communists continued to work outside of Korea, the communist movement in Korea itself devolved into an underground operation for the next several years.

As demonstrated here, the early communist movements both in Korea and by Korean exiles abroad were steeped in factionalism and the inability of various groups to work together to accomplish similar goals. The various factions were disorganized, lacked proper funding, and were constantly under the threat of the Japanese police who were ruthlessly effective at raiding meetings and arresting suspected communist leaders. When these groups attempted to make a comeback in the post-liberation political landscape, they were just as disjointed, which allowed the so called “New Communists” like Kim Il-Sung and his partisans (those not involved in the communist movement during the colonial period) to establish themselves with ease.

### **Introduction to Kim Il-Sung**

Around the same time that the majority of communist activities in Korea began to diminish, the man known as Kim Il-Sung was beginning to make a name for himself on the battlefields of Manchuria. Not much of Kim's early life before this point is known for sure; a combination of scarcity of knowledge and North Korean fabrications make many details unclear. It is known that he was born on April 15, 1912 in the city of Pyongyang with the name Kim Song-Ju. His childhood home in Man'gyŏngdae district is today a shrine dedicated to Kim and his parents. He was the eldest of three sons and his parents were lower-middle class citizens.<sup>35</sup> His mother, Kang Pan-sŏk, came from a very religious family and Kim was raised Christian as a result; he was even practicing to be a church organist when he was young.<sup>36</sup> His father, Kim Hyŏng-jik, was a small time intellectual who made a living as a teacher, herbal doctor and office worker. They were by no means wealthy, but they were slightly better off than most people at that time. Of course, the regime asserts that his parents were part of the peasant class and were therefore very poor. They also declare that Kim's parents were not just members of the independence movement against Japan, but were prominent leaders.<sup>37</sup> His family moved to Manchuria where he attended a Chinese, not Korean, elementary school. Because he attended a few different schools and moved often, and also due to a lack of reliable information during this time, it is difficult to determine for certain when his formal education stopped. Sources vary greatly on the issue, with some saying he was expelled for illegal activities sometime around the 8<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade<sup>38</sup> and others saying he either left school around age 17 when he was arrested<sup>39</sup> or that he did in fact graduate.<sup>40</sup> Kim's first contact with communism came in 1929 when he joined a youth group in Kirin, Manchuria. North Korean propaganda asserts that he was the head of all Korean communists by age 14.<sup>41</sup> Both of Kim's parents had died while he was still a teenager, leaving Kim and his siblings on their own.

In the early 1930's, Kim chose to abandon his younger brothers and joined a Chinese guerrilla army called the Northeast People's Revolutionary Army (NEPRA). This would be the beginning of his relatively impressive military career.

By 1935, he had moved through the ranks and commanded a small group of soldiers operating in Chientao. Although Kim had some basic understanding of communism, he joined the guerrilla forces to fight the Japanese for the sake of Korean independence, not on behalf of communism. This began to change when he learned about communism through a Chinese guerrilla named Wei Zhengmin who was an officer in the Chinese guerrilla army. Kim greatly admired Wei and tried to emulate him: Wei was famous for riding a beautiful white horse in battle. In the revolutionary museum in Pyongyang, there is a painting of Kim sitting upon a white horse looking valiant and leading his men in combat.<sup>42</sup> While it is true that Kim took part in some important battles and led his troops on victorious raiding incursions, his achievements were nothing spectacular. North Korean propaganda claims that at this time he was Commander in Chief of the Korean People's Revolutionary Army, which he founded on April 15, 1932, and had no affiliation with Chinese guerrilla groups. In reality, he was a junior officer and was subordinate to several Chinese superiors.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the Korean People's Revolutionary Army did not exist at this time (it was officially established on February 8, 1948); it was simply the Korean Volunteer Army which was a nationalist fighting force and had no affiliation to NEPRA or the communists. NEPRA joined forces with other Chinese guerrilla armies to form the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army (NEAJUA) in early 1936. The entire fighting force of the NEAJUA was around 15,000, according to Japanese intelligence at the time.<sup>44</sup>

By late 1936, Kim was commander of the entire 6th Division of the 2nd Army (commanded by another Korean, Chu Chin) and led them to some minor victories against the

Japanese from 1937 to 1940. However, it should be noted that a division within this loosely organized guerrilla army was significantly smaller than a standard army division; Kim was likely in command of 150-200 troops. One of the most successful campaigns Kim fought in was the Poch'ŏnbo raid in 1937. He led a division of men over the Manchurian border into Korea and destroyed several Japanese administrative buildings, stole arms and money, and killed seven Japanese police. The raid was planned by the Korean Fatherland Restoration Association, of which Kim later claimed to be the president. Other important battles Kim took part in during this time were Limingshui (1937), Liudaogou (1938), and Hongqihe (1940).<sup>45</sup>

Beginning in 1939, the Japanese increased their efforts to crush the guerrillas in Manchuria. They promised immunity from punishment to any guerrilla who surrendered and provided useful information as well as bringing in new leadership and reinforcements to their Manchurian armies. Additionally, racial tensions between Chinese and Koreans led many Koreans to voluntarily desert. Because of his background in Chinese schools and the fact that he spoke Chinese fluently, Kim's Chinese superiors trusted him greatly and thought highly of him.<sup>46</sup> It must be said that Kim fought against the Japanese for another year or so under incredibly difficult conditions and was one of the few commanders left alive who did not surrender. By late 1939, there was a 200,000 yen reward for any information about Kim Il-Sung; he was the most wanted guerrilla in all of Manchuria.<sup>47</sup> But after the Japanese began to increase their efforts to crush the guerrilla forces, Kim began to have doubts about continuing his operations. When his mentor and hero, Wei Zhengmin, died in battle on March 8, 1941, Kim finally decided his days as a guerrilla soldier were over. North Korean propaganda maintains that Kim stayed and fought the Japanese until the end of the war in 1945; while the more accepted theory is that he left Manchuria for Khabarovsk, Russia in 1941 and joined the Red Army.<sup>48</sup> His time in Russia was



spent mainly in Khabarovsk. One can assume he spent most of his time training with the Russian military and possibly being educated further in Communist ideology, but there is very little information about the years he spent there. Kim trained at Okeanskaya Field School and was eventually promoted to captain of the 88<sup>th</sup> Independent Brigade.<sup>49</sup> It was also during this time in Russia (1942) that Kim's son and future heir, Kim Jong-Il was born to his first wife, Kim Chang-suk. They eventually had two other children together, a son and a daughter, but Kim Chang-suk died in 1949 from complications during childbirth.

## **Korea after World War II**

Korea was liberated on August 15, 1945 when Japan formally surrendered to the Allies. This ended 35 years of Japanese occupation, and with it, their attempts to subjugate the Korean people and make them second-class citizens. The Japanese had enacted various laws in the late 1930's and early 1940's to eradicate the Korean culture and language. Koreans had been ordered to observe Shinto as their religion, Korean newspapers were replaced by Japanese, Koreans were forced to adopt Japanese names, and finally the Korean language was made illegal in 1942.<sup>50</sup> While Japanese occupation would prove to have long-lasting negative effects on the Korean population, there were also some undeniable benefits. Under Japanese rule, the country was forced to modernize very quickly. The northern half of Korea, which had many more natural resources but was poor in arable land, was dedicated to producing manufactured goods. In the South, most of the land was very well suited for farming and crop production. In the 35 years that the Japanese controlled Korea, they successfully brought about the modernization and industrialization of Korea by helping to construct factories, build railways, and establish a telecommunication system. Thanks to the Japanese, Korea emerged in 1945 as a developed and economically sound country; at some points in the 1930's, Korea's economic growth outpaced

that of Japan's. It is safe to assume that if the occupation had not happened, Korea would have remained a backward and underdeveloped country for many more years, unless it was invaded and developed by a different Western power.<sup>51</sup>

At the time of liberation, very few old communists were still active in the country, most were exiled, in jail, or dead. Having been occupied for the previous 35 years, the pervasive opinion of most Koreans was to establish a truly free and independent nation. They saw the US and USSR presence as a temporary setback to this plan, when in reality they received two new occupiers to replace the old one. On September 6, the first organized political group, the Korean People's Republic (KPR), formed in the South with Syngman Rhee as chairman and Yŏ Un-hyŏng as vice chairman. There seems to have been an even distribution of communists and nationalists in the organization, and compromise between the two sides on many issues looked promising. Ultimately, before having carried out any important action, the KPR was disbanded by General John Hodge, the military governor of Korea for the United States, who then made a policy outlawing any Korean-organized government in the U.S.-occupied South.<sup>52</sup> In the North, the situation was very different under Russian occupation.

When the 25<sup>th</sup> Russian Army entered Korea, they were entirely unprepared to manage their half of the country. In fact, they had arrived with only Japanese translators, expecting a long and difficult fight to expel the Japanese army. They had no solid plan of how to organize and administer the territory they controlled and were quite unknowledgeable in terms of local Korean politics. The decision to mold the North into a communist, pro-Soviet Russia puppet came after diplomatic talks between the USSR and US failed to reach an agreement about how to manage the country. The Americans were insistent about occupying the South and turning it into a friendly anti-communist buffer state. As a result, the Russians proceeded to make their own

satellite state in the North as a countermeasure. The commander of the 25<sup>th</sup> Army and consequently the man in charge of the Soviet occupation, Colonel-General Ivan Chistiakov, set about organizing a provisional government called the Soviet Civil Administration. Other key figures during this time were Major-General Nikolai Lebedev, the political commissar attached to the 25<sup>th</sup> Army, who handled the internal political affairs, and Colonel Alexandre Ignatiev who oversaw the process of “sovietization” in the North.<sup>53</sup> Chistiakov arbitrarily chose Pyongyang as the capital for this new government, which would prove useful later on, as Pyongyang was one of the oldest and most historically significant cities in Korea, which made the government appear to be more legitimate.<sup>54</sup> The process of creating a pro-Russian state proved to be a difficult task for many reasons. Communism in the North was almost non-existent, as most of the efforts of Korean communists were focused in Seoul. As a result there were no reliable local communists who the Russians could prop up, one had to be created. One of the only well-known political activists in Pyongyang was a right wing nationalist named Cho Man-sik. He was well known by many North Koreans because of his anti-Japanese protests, and despite not being a communist, he was the best choice at the time to head the new government the Soviets were establishing due to his popularity. The SCA also brought many Russian-Koreans to Korea to serve in the newly established departments of the SCA in every major city and county. It was during this time, autumn of 1945, that Kim was sent back to Korea along with other members of the 88<sup>th</sup> Independent Brigade aboard a Russian ship headed for Wonsan.

### **Founding the Regime**

His return to Korea at this precise time was a stroke of luck for Kim, as the Russians were preemptively looking for a new front man to replace Cho Man-sik with a more pro-Soviet politician. Kim fit all the necessary requirements: he was pro-communist, he had an impressive

military career, and he was willing to carry out orders on behalf of his Soviet superiors. Upon entering Korea with the Russian Army, Kim used the name “Il-Sung”, which he likely adopted while fighting in Manchuria, instead of his birth name. The South claims he stole the name from a different Korean patriot and freedom fighter. This man, the “original” Kim Il-Sung, was very well known and revered for his courage and bravery while fighting against the Japanese. He was a legend to many Koreans, communists and nationals alike. However, there is no definitive proof that he even existed. At the time of Kim’s ascension to power in the North, many people believed him to be the *legendary* Kim Il-Sung which undoubtedly helped bolster his reputation and give credibility to his past.<sup>55</sup> Besides Kim, the other key player in consideration for the future North Korean government was an old communist named Pak Hŏn Yŏng. Pak seemed the most likely choice at the time, but his connection to the old communist movement did not win him any favor with Stalin. Additionally, he was not known at all in North Korea as he spent most of his time and efforts in Seoul. However, he was still a contender for a position of power. On October 14, 1945, Kim Il-Sung spoke publicly for the first time to the Korean people in Pyongyang at a rally to honor the Soviet Army for liberating Korea. Kim was fluent in Chinese and conversational Russian, but his Korean skills were rather underdeveloped. Some of his early speeches were written by Russian translators which Kim then recited.<sup>56</sup> Major-General Lebedev used this opportunity to present Kim as a national hero and successful military man. Most Koreans in attendance doubted the claims of Kim; they did not think a man so young (33 years old at this time) could have achieved such an impressive military career.<sup>57</sup>

Factionalism has always been a major issue in Korean politics, as demonstrated by the failures of the old communist and nationalist movements in Korea during the 1920’s and 1930’s. In the late 1940’s, there existed four major factions within the emerging North Korean state: the

Domestic faction, the Yanan faction, the Soviet-Koreans, and the Partisan/Guerrilla faction. The Domestic faction was lead by Pak Hŏn Yŏng and consisted of Korean communists who remained in the country during Japanese occupation. Most of their efforts were concentrated in Seoul, and they had little influence in the North. Pak was the leader of the Southern bureau of the Korean Communist Party but was forced to move to the North due to American influence. In 1946 the SKCP merged with two other groups and formed the Worker's party of South Korea, also under Pak's control. The Yanan faction was headed by Kim Tu-bong and was made up of Koreans who spent the occupation and war years in the small town of Yanan, Shanxi province, China. Kim Tu-bong also was the leader of the New People's Party; a communist party formed by Korean communist exiles after their return in 1945-1946. The group called the Soviet-Koreans was under the authority of Alexei Ivanovich Hegai (Korean name: Hŏ Ka-i). Hegai was born in Khabarovsk in 1908 and had been a member of the Russian communist party since 1930. Like many other ethnic Koreans, he was sent back to Korea from Russia to serve as a translator and political advisor. Lastly, the veterans of the war against the Japanese in Manchuria made up the Partisan/Guerrilla faction. They were lead by Kim Il-Sung who at this point was being ushered into positions of power by his Russian superiors.<sup>58</sup>

Unlike their leader, many members of the Partisan faction did not enjoy immediate success. Although they could all boast military records, the majority of the former guerrilla soldiers were not well educated nor were they well known or had any reputation as leaders. While the other groups' ranks consisted of political activists and intellectuals, most of the partisans were of poor backgrounds. On top of that, the Partisan/Guerrilla faction had the fewest overall members. Their only advantage was in their leader Kim Il-Sung and the fact that he had the support of the Russian high command. These four groups, while having very different

backgrounds, made up the North Korean Workers Party by merging the Communist Party of Korea and the New People's Party. The four major factions were forced to refrain from attacking the others while the Russians remained in the North. Regardless, none of the groups trusted the others and tended to stick to themselves in matters of politics.

Kim's early political career was greatly assisted by the Russians, sometimes against his own will. Kim was reported to have said that he did not want to become a politician, he would have much rather stayed with the Red Army and made a military career for himself.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, the Russians were intent on molding Kim to be a political leader because he was the most qualified person for the position at that time. His first major position was acting as the deputy chairman of the newly reinstated Communist Party of Korea. Disbanded in 1928, the party returned in 1945. The chairman of the Northern bureau of the Communist Party of Korea at this time was Kim Yŏng Bŏm, a relatively unknown Korean communist. Kim usurped his position as chairman a few months later. North Korea today claims Kim was the sole founder and only chairman of the party, when in reality he was second in command and was helped into that position by the Russians.<sup>60</sup> Cho Man-sik created a political party of his own, the Democratic Party. Cho had been a thorn in the side of Lebedev and the occupying Soviet forces for some time now, but their relationship took a turn for the worse when the announcement of the Soviet trusteeship reached Cho. This trusteeship, essentially a declaration of prolonged Soviet occupation, greatly angered Cho and his supporters, who saw it simply as five more years of not being allowed their independence. He refused to sign the agreement and resigned at the same moment, taking many of his nationalist supporters with him. He was promptly arrested under outlandish claims (being a "pro-Japanese spy" or an "American informant" were popular charges leveled against political enemies at the time), and was put in prison. Cho was eventually

executed, along with many other political prisoners in 1950 during the Korean War, while the communists were retreating from Pyongyang.

Cho's party was taken over by a former guerrilla fighter and friend of Kim's shortly after his arrest. The Russians allowed the organization to exist to give the impression of political freedom, when in reality it became clear that it was a puppet group under control of the communists. They maintained the appearance of a right wing party which was not only good for propaganda but was also useful at luring and capturing political dissidents. While many nationalists were upset about Cho's arrest, the Soviet occupation and the obvious gravitation towards establishing a communist government appear to have been tolerated by the majority of the North Korean population, when compared to the reaction of Southerners to the American occupation which saw many large protests and rebellions. Besides a few minor revolts and acts of civil unrest, the only major anti-communist outburst was an assassination attempt on Kim Il-Sung and other key party figures in 1946 by North Korean nationalists in partnership with nationalists from the South, which ended in failure. The plot would have worked, but Kim was saved by a Russian officer who caught a grenade thrown at him.<sup>61</sup> Outbreaks of protests or violence like this were not common in the North during these formative years. Whether this was due to genuine satisfaction with the emerging regime or successful repression by the Soviet occupation cannot be known for certain.

The late 1940's were significant years in North Korean history. One of the biggest events during this time was the creation of the Russian-trained Korean People's Army on February 8, 1946. The vast majority of the high ranking leaders of the army were all ex-guerrillas and partisans Kim had served with. These generals and officers were completely loyal to Kim, meaning Kim had absolute control of the military. Additionally, new schools for training military

and political cadres opened during this time, along with the prestigious Kim Il-Sung University in Pyongyang which specialized in teaching engineering and science. In 1947, the first constitution for the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea was drafted and sent to Moscow for approval. In this constitution, the leader of the state was specified as Kim Tu-bong, not Kim Il-Sung. Kim Tu-bong was chairman of the North Korean Workers Party, but it was clear that he had no real power. He was a linguist and a scholar with no military background. Neither the Soviets nor Kim Il-Sung saw him as a threat or rival, so it made sense to let him stay in this position, given his intelligence and understanding of politics. The constitution was ratified on September 9, 1947 and North Korea was officially a nation. In the South, the government under Syngman Rhee was ratified on August 15, a few weeks before that of the North. Kim Il-Sung had made a commitment to himself to not be the one responsible for officially dividing Korea into two nations.<sup>62</sup> Only after South Korea declared their independence did Kim move to do the same in the North. Both sides resolutely refused to acknowledge the other as a legitimate government and instead claimed their government had rightful sovereignty over all of Korea: Seoul was the official capital of the DPRK until 1972.<sup>63</sup> In 1949 the North Korean Workers Party and the South Korean Workers Party joined to form the Worker's Party of Korea, which is the sole political party in the DPRK today.<sup>64</sup> Kim Il-Sung was elected as the first chairman, solidifying his role as head of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. His most pressing issue upon taking office was the reunification of the country.

### **The Korean War and its aftermath**

It's no secret that Kim advocated for a military operation to reunite the Koreas. To him, the presence of American military forces in the South meant no diplomatic agreement could be met until they were driven from the country. In a speech made in 1950 titled *The Korean*



*People's Struggle for the Building of a Unified, Democratic Independent State*, Kim

acknowledged the growing differences between the two Koreas: “North and South Korea are going different ways. As the days go by, the sharp contrast between the political and economic situations in North and South Korea shows more convincingly which is the right path leading the country and the people to prosperity.”<sup>65</sup> After weeks of asking for permission to launch a reunification war, he was finally given the green light (albeit reluctantly) by Stalin. The Korean People's Army crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel on June 25, 1950 and made quick progress. Seoul was captured three days later, and by the end of August, only one month after the campaign began, the North occupied 90% of the country.<sup>66</sup> The war was going very much in Kim's favor and the reunification of the peninsula seemed to be imminent. The tide turned when a UN coalition force landed at Inchon in September of 1950 and pushed back the Korean People's Army. The KPA retreated quickly, abandoning the capital Pyongyang and finally ending up just outside the Chinese border.

At this point, October 1950, The Chinese Peoples Volunteer Army joined the fight. What started as an internal war to reunify the Koreas became a proxy war fought between China and the US/UN forces. Without Chinese intervention, the North would have surely been destroyed. They managed to push the coalition forces back to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel where the war started, and so began two years of trench warfare, heavy bombing campaigns, and attrition. The KPA had a very small role in the war from 1951 to 1953; they mostly guarded rear positions and secured supply lines and communications posts. With hardly any progress being made by either side, the war ended in an armistice on July 27, 1953. The Korean DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) was established on the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and the division of the peninsula was now more solidified than ever. About 2.5 million North Koreans died in the conflict, which was about 25% of their pre-war

population.<sup>67</sup> Kim had failed in his goal to reunify Korea under his rule, but he still had a firm grasp on the North, which is where he focused all of his attention.

The post-war years were characterized by massive reconstruction and economic spending to remodel the war torn country: the capital city of Pyongyang, for example, was all but destroyed during the bombing campaigns and had to be rebuilt from the ground up. The North followed Soviet and Chinese models of planned economies. For about ten years or so after the Korean War ended, Kim's economic plans were focused on heavy industry and making good use of North Korea's abundance in natural resources. While most of the money that was funding these projects was coming from the USSR and China, Kim began isolating himself politically from both of his allies. Kim did not like the idea of being a puppet forever; he had his own ambitions to carry out. To ensure that both nations continued to give him economic support, Kim maintained an impartial position on many issues between the two communist superpowers. His delegates signed treaties of friendship and cooperation with both nations, while China and Russia began to diverge. In the late 1950's Kim introduced the Ch'ŏnlima movement, modeled after Mao's "great leap forward". It was an economic plan that emphasized rapid growth and a reliance on people working very hard for little incentive other than the gratitude of Kim Il-sung.<sup>68</sup> Kim was supposedly able to inspire workers to produce double or triple their production quotas with only a few words of wisdom and his own personal charisma. It was during these years that Kim spent much of his time giving his famous "on-the-spot guidance" where he would travel to a farm or factory and solve all of the worker's problems after only a few minutes of examination and thought.<sup>69</sup> Once again, Kim most likely had the formal education of a high school graduate at best and could not have possibly understood the complicated workings of

every agricultural and industrial field which he was declared to be an expert in. Regardless, it was a practice Kim took seriously and would continue to do well into his final years.

The era of the 1950's and 1960's for Kim was a lengthy process of solidifying his power, eliminating rivals and moving out of the shadows of the Soviet Union and China. Although he was receiving economic aid from both countries to support the rebuilding of North Korea after the war, Kim was doing his best to remain neutral in the emerging Sino-Soviet dispute. Stalin's death in 1953 was a traumatic event in Kim's life. To Kim, Stalin was a mentor, friend, and in many ways his idol. The de-Stalinization movement in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death troubled Kim greatly: he was saddened to see his friend's image being insulted and he also began fearing something similar would happen to himself. As a result of their difference in opinions about Stalin, his rapport with the new Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev, was not very firm. He also detested the idea of peaceful coexistence with the West which Khrushchev was an advocate of: Kim saw it as an admission of defeat.<sup>70</sup> Although his intention was to not choose sides, the break between the two great communist superpowers was inevitable and Kim found himself more often than not supporting China over the Russians. After all, the Chinese intervention in the Korean War had saved Kim's regime from annihilation while the Soviets merely supplied them with war materials and training.

After the war ended, Kim sought to diminish foreign influence in the state as well as remove any and all potential rivals from usurping his power. Members of all three factions, the Domestic, Yanan, and Soviet-Koreans would be systematically weakened and removed from power. The political purges, which would last for several years and leave none other than Kim at the pinnacle of North Korean politics, began in 1951 when Alexei Ivanovich Hegai, the de facto leader of the Soviet-Koreans, was removed from his position as secretary of the Korean Workers

Party. Two years later, Hegai was found dead in his house with a hunting rifle by his side. While his death ruled as a suicide, it is almost certain that he was murdered on the orders of Kim Il-Sung.<sup>71</sup> Once again, without a prominent leader, the faction was no longer a direct threat to Kim. In 1953, Pak Hŏn Yŏng of the Domestic faction was arrested and purged of his position as Minister of Foreign Affairs. He would remain in jail until 1955 when he faced trial and was sentenced to death for supposedly working with the United States during the war and planning a military coup against Kim Il-Sung.<sup>72</sup> With Pak eliminated, the Domestic was left powerless because there were no other influential leaders to take his place. A joint conference of Soviets and Chinese met to criticize Kim for his actions and force him to reinstate party members who were removed during this time. Kim obliged, but only for the reason that he still needed the economic aid both of his neighbors were donating. The Soviets and Chinese were wise to attempt to reverse the damage Kim had done, as the removal of Hegai and prominent Yanan members like Pak Il-u signified a decline in both Soviet and Chinese influence over the North Korean government. The purges resumed in 1957 when several leaders from the Yanan faction were arrested as part of “ideological inspections” being carried out by the secret police. The leader of the group, Kim Tu-bong, was accused of being the mastermind behind the same coup that Pak Hŏn Yŏng was involved with and was never seen again after 1958.<sup>73</sup> Purges of remaining Soviet-Koreans took place in 1958 and as USSR-DPRK relations deteriorated, many Soviet Koreans felt it was the right time to move back to Russia to avoid potential problems. Even some of Kim’s own partisan generals were expelled for failing to win the war against the Americans, although they would be quietly reinstated many years later.

By the time of the 4<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Korean Workers Party in 1961, 16 years after he first came to prominence in the North, Kim had succeeded in reshaping the government and

purging it of those who had the potential to challenge him.<sup>74</sup> Those who remained had proved their loyalty to him in one way or another and were allowed to keep their positions. Still, small scale purges occurred periodically well into the 1970's leaving only Kim's Partisan friends in power. Besides them, positions were filled by a younger generation of technocrats and the children of Partisans and Guerrilla members, thus ensuring a power base that would be subservient to Kim.

### **Isolationism and rise of the military**

Kim's relationship with the Soviets was at an all time low in 1963 and it was apparent that he had chosen Mao and the People's Republic of China as his new ally. Kim's relationship with Mao Zedong was much stronger than with Khrushchev. Both Kim and Mao had been guerrilla commanders in their own time, both came from nations that had been occupied by the Japanese, and both reminisced about the old alliance between Korea and China when comparing their current friendship.<sup>75</sup> The Soviet Union cut off aid to North Korea very abruptly around this time in response to their apparent allegiance to China, causing major setbacks in production. China was not in a position to provide more aid than they were already giving, and the North Korean economy suffered greatly. Shortly after, however, the North Koreans and Chinese would undergo their own quarrel. The Sino-Korean dispute of 1965 was much more serious than that of the Koreans and Soviets. Kim's reputation was attacked by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution through slogans, rumors and posters asserting Kim was a Soviet stooge, a capitalist, a revisionist, and that he had insulted Chairman Mao. The issue of the Korean-Chinese border dispute was also brought into the forefront, specifically concerning the area around Mt. Paektu. Another major reason for the split was that Kim had tried to normalize his relationship with the Soviets around this time (made easier after Khrushchev's fall from power in late 1964), and the

Red Guards, swept up in their fanaticism, saw this as a blatant anti-Chinese move.<sup>76</sup> By the late 1960's, the Cultural Revolution in China had pacified to some extent and relations were normalized. In trying to remain neutral in the Sino-Soviet split, Kim had politically isolated himself and his nation. Although diplomacy between North Korea and its two neighbors resumed, their new relationship could hardly be called an alliance.

While economic aid from both countries resumed as well, they were not as generous with their donations as they had been immediately following the Korean War. To compensate, Kim launched more economic plans to boost production. He instituted a new work day model in which people would work for eight hours, study for eight hours, and rest for eight hours. He also ordered more women into the labor force. He mustered all the personal charm he could in order to inspire his people to work harder, but the economic surge of the 1950's could not be replicated without foreign support. His Partisan military leaders also took it upon themselves to allocate more money to be spent on the military, since the country was no longer guaranteed the protection of China or Russia. Kim originally supported the idea of militarizing the entire country and populace, but this was at the cost of already scarce resources. Military spending was only 2.6% of the national budget in 1961 but by 1971 it had jumped up to over 30%.<sup>77</sup> Kim's Partisans occupied many key positions in the party as well as the military. For the most part, this was an advantage because it meant Kim could control both through his influence. However, beginning in the mid to late 1960's, this backfired as many prominent military men gained enough popularity to the point of being able to challenge Kim. A total of eleven high ranking Partisans/ex-guerrillas were purged from the party and military in 1969.<sup>78</sup> Kim's decision to remove them came at a time when many of them were rising in popularity and were also making major decisions on their own without Kim's approval. Most of these men had served under Kim

in Manchuria and had devoted their lives to his success, supporting him every step of the way. It seemed that Kim's desire to have complete control over the country without any group being powerful enough to rival him was stronger than any sort of bond he shared with his once loyal soldiers.

## **President Kim**

In an attempt to stay relevant on a global level, Kim now focused on the so-called third world: countries that had not formally aligned themselves with either the capitalist or communist camps. Kim was a huge supporter of the idea of an international communist movement and sought to be seen as the leader of such an organization. He hosted delegates from relatively poor countries in Africa, South East Asia, and Latin America, and boasted to them the industrial and military might of the DPRK in an attempt to garner support. He also publicly declared his position on the war in Vietnam, suggesting that an international communist force should be dispatched there to help the Vietnamese fight the Americans.<sup>79</sup> Besides establishing some centers in Africa to teach Juche to aspiring communist leaders, this ambition was largely unsuccessful and Kim remained isolated and without political allies.

Most of his attention was still focused on domestic issues: he continued to tour the country giving his "on the spot guidance" despite his advanced age. At the Fifth Party Congress in 1970, Kim spoke on many important issues. He took time to criticize farm and factory collectives that were not meeting production quotas as well as to cite specific examples of workers taking whatever surplus goods they had and selling them for personal profit, rather than donating them to the state. On a more positive note, he also declared that North Korea had succeeded in transforming itself from a developing nation to a socialist industrial state. "For 25

years now, the people in the northern half of the Republic, using communist ideas as their guiding principle, have been building an independent sovereign state, rich and strong, and creating their new, happy life.”<sup>80</sup> For the first time, the country was entirely self-sufficient in the production of grains and had made great advances in technology and education.<sup>81</sup> When discussing the military, Kim remarked that their country was one of rivers and mountains, not suitable for advanced military equipment. Rather, the strength of the army was in the political and ideological superiority of the soldiers and their intense hatred for their enemies.<sup>82</sup> Overall, his report was very general and no comments were made about the Soviet or Chinese disputes or the Partisan purge of the previous decade.

After the trials and tribulations of the 1960’s, Kim spent the next several years solidifying his status as the supreme leader of the Korean people. He now focused all of his attention on immortalizing himself and his family in the history books. Hundreds of statues of him were built during this time, as well as a few dedicated to his parents. For his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1972, a new revolutionary museum depicting important moments in Kim’s life was constructed along with a 66 foot solid bronze statue of Kim, situated in one of the most picturesque spots in Pyongyang beside the Taedog River. It is mandatory in most cases for tourists to bring flowers to lay beneath the statue when visiting the country.<sup>83</sup> There are about a dozen famous museums in the North, the most well-known of which is the International Friendship Exhibition. Opened in 1978, this traditional looking structure houses an assortment of gifts and donations given to Kim Il-Sung and his sons from various ambassadors, dignitaries, and world leaders. Kim also bestowed upon himself the country’s highest awards while creating new medals bearing his name. He had several mansions and villas throughout the country, and lived in relative extravagance: he turned North Korea into his own personal paradise. He also began grooming his son, Kim Jong-Il, to



become his future successor and in doing so maintained the idea of his family's tradition of being revolutionaries and defenders of the Korean people. In 1972 he succeeded in rewriting the constitution and creating for himself the position of President of the Republic, allowing himself even more administrative power. This new position gave him so much authority that many positions in the government became obsolete. To delegate all the tasks he could not directly oversee, he created the Central People's Committee, an administrative body that absorbed the jobs of several previous organizations. Members of the Central People's Committee could only be elected to their positions with the recommendation of the President of the Republic, Kim Il-Sung.<sup>84</sup> On top of this, Kim still maintained his position as head of the Korean Workers party. He controlled, either directly or through his cronies, nearly every aspect of politics in the North. With no checks or balances to his power, every article of legislation he proposed was passed with 100% approval. He began to make decisions without consulting the party or calling for a party congress. In fact, the party played an increasingly irrelevant role in the new political landscape.

Kim was trying to move his focus from the party to the state as the primary political entity. With no other political parties to oppose him and with few remaining Partisans in the KWP, Kim saw no need to maintain its authority. The deliberate shift from party to state could also be explained by Kim's desire to appear as a legitimate government in the world rather than a Soviet satellite ruled by a defunct party.<sup>85</sup> While his original source of legitimacy was his military career and revolutionary actions against the Japanese, his new power base derived from the longevity of his rule, the placement of supporters in key positions within the government, and the fabrications created about his life by the propaganda apparatus. He had reigned over the North for so long that people had begun to forget what life was like previous to Kim's rise. The

state media continued to proclaim to the people that Kim's wise leadership was responsible for their continued success and superiority: North Korea was a socialist paradise and everything outside its borders was inferior. By forcing his people into isolation, Kim had complete control over what they heard and saw; ensuring his own popularity would never fall and no foreign influences could infiltrate his private fortress.

### **Final years**

By the time of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1982, Kim was finally showing signs of slowing down. He rarely visited work sites anymore to give his guidance, and his son was taking on the majority of responsibilities concerning administration of the country. Many of his close comrades and fellow Partisans, those who remained at least, began dying in great numbers. Kim made fewer speeches, gave fewer interviews, and his charisma that once inspired his people to work at superhuman intensity was all but gone. He still made trips to China, the Soviet Union, and several Eastern European countries to meet new heads of state and attend various rallies. On these trips, specifically to China and Russia, he patched whatever feelings of resentment remained between the two nations.<sup>86</sup> In the last years of Kim's life, his people unveiled several new monuments dedicated to him, specifically Kim Il-Sung stadium (larger than the stadium built in South Korea for the then upcoming 1988 Olympic games), the Kaesŏnmun (a stone monument modeled after the famous Arc de Triomphe in Paris, but ten meters taller) and the Juche Tower (a stone obelisk exactly one meter taller than the Washington Monument).<sup>87</sup> Not all monuments to him exist in Pyongyang; throughout the country in almost every city there are shrines commemorating him for one thing or another.

Aspects of the cult of personality around Kim Il-Sung became increasingly fanatical towards the end of his life in the late 1980's, largely due to his own actions. His political thoughts and methods of economic development were viewed as part of Korean tradition. His cult demands the adoration of not only him but also his family; past, present and future. He was often referred to as *suryong*, meaning supreme leader. Decades previous, Kim reserved that title for Lenin (our great *suryong*), Stalin (*suryong* of the entire working people of the world) and Mao (*suryong* of the Chinese people). Kim began to call himself *suryong* as early as 1967 during the Sino-Korean dispute and well after the deaths of Lenin and Stalin.<sup>88</sup> This was just one of his numerous titles: "iron-willed brilliant commander" and "the sun of the nation" to name a few. His image and name are intertwined with the image of the nation itself, one does not exist without the other. His photograph is often displayed beside the national flag and the song of the Marshal Kim Il-Sung is often played directly before the national anthem at official events. There are innumerable poems, stories, and songs of which he is the topic, and libraries, stadiums, and schools which bear his name. Pictures of him are required to be hung in schools, subways, and even family homes. His ability to extract unyielding adoration and respect from his people would have the Korean Kings of ancient times jealous beyond imagination. Even though he tried to immortalize himself through monuments, not even Kim could live forever, much to the shock of his people. On July 8, 1994, Kim died peacefully and the country descended into a crazed depression. His funeral procession was lined on both sides by crowds of wailing, grieving citizens who had no idea what to expect of their future without their supreme leader to guide them.<sup>89</sup>

The establishment of communism in Korea was a long and immensely difficult process by those involved. The movement advanced at an incredibly slow pace under the pervasive eye

of the Japanese secret police, and was even completely halted and disbanded at one point. After liberation, these “Old Communists” attempted to revive their defunct revolution only to be repressed by the United States in Seoul and silenced by the Russians in Pyongyang. At this point, Kim Il-Sung, his partisan comrades, and other members of the so called “New Communists” reentered Korea and achieved positions of power in the government and military. Through clever political manipulation and by the grace of his Russian supporters, Kim was able to eliminate potential rivals until there were none left to challenge his position at the apex of politics in North Korea. Over the next few years, a Stalinist-like cult of personality would emerge around Kim, thanks in part to the Russians but also to Kim’s own success as a guerrilla fighter and leader. No credit is given to the communist movements of the 1920’s and 1930’s; despite the numerous difficulties they endured to try to build a better country. Propaganda surrounding Kim deified every possible aspect of his life; and his people praised his many successes, whether they were true or fabricated. Kim spent the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century transforming North Korea into the reclusive and militant state that still exists today. By gradually shifting power over to his son, Kim ensured his dynasty would live on and the Kim family would forever be in power. Still, nobody could possibly equal Kim in terms of the level of adoration he receives. Even today, over 20 years after his death, Kim Il-Sung reserves the title “Eternal President of the Republic” and has thousands of statues, monuments, and paintings to commemorate his greatness.

Based on my research, Kim Il-Sung had no intention of becoming the supreme leader of North Korea in 1945. He was assisted every step of the way by his Russian advisors who directed most of the internal affairs. After having been put in such a place of power however, Kim used all of his resources to achieve what he believed to be best for his people: the implementation of communism under his rule, and the reunification of the two Koreas. As time

went by, it became apparent that Kim was more focused on only improving his own reputation, both domestically and internationally. He systematically eliminated his rival factions within the North Korean government, leaving none other than himself at the pinnacle of power. He deliberately isolated North Korea from the rest of the world and began the process of indoctrinating his people into believing he was a true God amongst men. Kim Il-Sung's choice to quietly appoint his son, Kim Jong-Il, to be his successor is uncharacteristic of every other communist regime. Korea had always been, until 1945, a nation ruled by a monarch: there was no concept of democracy and heavy importance was placed upon familial bonds. By gradually shifting power over to his son, Kim ensured his dynasty would live on and the Kim family would forever be in power. Since 1945, the two Koreas have gone in radically different directions. In the span of a couple generations, a nation that had been united for over 1,000 years was split in half by the Cold War superpowers and forced to adopt very different styles of government. The South, initially a repressive anti-communist military dictatorship, is now a democracy with one of the strongest economies in the world. The North, which started out as a pseudo-communist Soviet puppet regime, has evolved into a reclusive autocracy with a semi-deified, monarch-like figure as the head of state.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Myers 100
- <sup>2</sup> Myers 33-34
- <sup>3</sup> Myers 27
- <sup>4</sup> Myers 27
- <sup>5</sup> Myers 34
- <sup>6</sup> Martin 3
- <sup>7</sup> Martin 13
- <sup>8</sup> Myers 105-106
- <sup>9</sup> Myers 96-98
- <sup>10</sup> Cha 73
- <sup>11</sup> Martin 2
- <sup>12</sup> Kim Il-Sung 173
- <sup>13</sup> Myers 46
- <sup>14</sup> Cha 73
- <sup>15</sup> Cha 10
- <sup>16</sup> Martin 6
- <sup>17</sup> Cha 7
- <sup>18</sup> Cha 72-73
- <sup>19</sup> Cha 75
- <sup>20</sup> Fairbank et al 612
- <sup>21</sup> Fairbank et al 613
- <sup>22</sup> Fairbank et al 553-554)
- <sup>23</sup> Fairbank et al 617
- <sup>24</sup> Fairbank et al 618
- <sup>25</sup> Fairbank et al 552-557
- <sup>26</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 4-5
- <sup>27</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 7-8
- <sup>28</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 11
- <sup>29</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 27
- <sup>30</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 62-65
- <sup>31</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 69-76
- <sup>32</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 86-88
- <sup>33</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 99
- <sup>34</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 130-131
- <sup>35</sup> Martin 14
- <sup>36</sup> Martin 12
- <sup>37</sup> Lankov “From Stalin to Kim Il-Sung” 51
- <sup>38</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 3, Suh “The Korean Communist Movement” 262
- <sup>39</sup> Lankov “The Real North Korea” 5
- <sup>40</sup> Lankov “From Stalin to Kim Il-Sung” 52
- <sup>41</sup> Lankov “The Real North Korea” 5
- <sup>42</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 10
- <sup>43</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 12-15
- <sup>44</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 29
- <sup>45</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 34-37
- <sup>46</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 34
- <sup>47</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 30
- <sup>48</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 291-293
- <sup>49</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 292
- <sup>50</sup> Millet 37
- <sup>51</sup> *North Korea a Country Study* 30-32

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- <sup>52</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 299  
<sup>53</sup> Lankov “From Stalin to Kim Il-Sung” 2-5  
<sup>54</sup> Lankov “From Stalin to Kim Il-Sung” 5  
<sup>55</sup> Suh “Korean Communist Movement” 256-261  
<sup>56</sup> Cha 70  
<sup>57</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 61  
<sup>58</sup> Lankov “From Stalin to Kim Il-Sung” 78-89  
<sup>59</sup> Lankov “From Stalin to Kim Il-Sung” 59  
<sup>60</sup> Lankov “From Stalin to Kim Il-Sung” 90  
<sup>61</sup> Lankov “From Stalin to Kim Il-Sung” 25  
<sup>62</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 97-98  
<sup>63</sup> Lankov “From Stalin to Kim Il-Sung” 45  
<sup>64</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 92-93  
<sup>65</sup> Kim Il-Sung 28  
<sup>66</sup> Lankov “From Stalin to Kim Il-Sung” 61  
<sup>67</sup> Martin 29  
<sup>68</sup> Myers 41-42  
<sup>69</sup> Myers 105-107  
<sup>70</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 143  
<sup>71</sup> Lankov “From Stalin to Kim Il-Sung” 146-152  
<sup>72</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 126-136  
<sup>73</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 152  
<sup>74</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 168-175  
<sup>75</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 176-178  
<sup>76</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 190-202  
<sup>77</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 219-220  
<sup>78</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 239  
<sup>79</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 226-227  
<sup>80</sup> Kim Il-Sung 137  
<sup>81</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 242-244  
<sup>82</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 244-245  
<sup>83</sup> Myers 48  
<sup>84</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 270-274  
<sup>85</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 274-276  
<sup>86</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 301  
<sup>87</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 316-321  
<sup>88</sup> Suh “Kim Il-Sung” 315-316  
<sup>89</sup> Myers 50-51

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