

The Korean Communist Movement: Some Basic Characteristics

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A Communist government was established in the northern half of Korea by the Soviet occupation authorities after the liberation of Korea in 1945, and it has been in operation for nearly four decades, but the history of the Korean Communist movement is much longer than the Communist government in the North. The beginning of the Korean Communist party, in fact, is as old as the Russian revolution, and many Korean Communists joined the Bolsheviks in fighting for the Russian revolution in the Soviet Far East. Many Korean Communist revolutionaries fought for the cause of communism in Korea during their struggle for national independence. There were many Korean revolutionaries who eventually subscribed to communism and fought and died, trying to establish a Communist system of government in Korea. The tragic consequence of their struggle is not only that they failed to establish such a system in Korea, but also that the Communist regime in the North has never recognized their long and hard struggle.

The reason, of course, is that what is established in the northern half of Korea resembles more a political system to accommodate the personal rule of Kim Il Sung than a Communist or Socialist system of government. The North Korean Communist government recognizes only the revolutionary activities of their supreme leader and the regime is engaged more in glorifying its leader than in refining its system. The North Korean regime is not a Socialist or Communist political system that can survive Kim, but rather a personal system where political

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power is handed down from father to son. Not only is this kind of practice alien to the Communist system of government, but it should also be totally unacceptable to those Korean Communists who fought and died for the cause of communism in Korea.

For its own political reasons, the South Korean government also does not recognize the Communist contribution to the cause of the Korean independence movement, and those gallant men who perished fighting for Korea during the Japanese occupation period are ignored by both North and South Korea. It is true that their effort to regain Korea's independence failed as surely as those made by the Korean Nationalists, but it is not the success or the failure of their struggle that determined their place in Korean history. Their fate is due more to the nature of the division of Korea, which has brought about benign neglect in the South; and it has become characteristic of the North Korean regime to denounce the activities of the early Korean Communists.

This paper is not an attempt to recount the long and arduous struggle of the Korean Communist movement, nor is it an attempt to pass judgment on the North Korean political system. The intent here is to introduce briefly some basic characteristics of the Korean Communist movement: its origin, its relationship with the Comintern, the problem of its leadership, the challenges to the Kim Il Sung group, and the discontinuity in the Korean Communist movement.

I. The Beginning

When communism was first introduced to the countries of East Asia, the way it was accepted varied from country to country, particularly in China, Japan, and Korea. Communism was introduced to the Chinese people by scholars who had studied Marxism, such as professors Zhen Dexiu and Li Dazhao of Beijing University, who studied the tenets of Marxism and published journals to educate young men. These scholars eventually ventured into Communist activities by organizing the first

Chinese Communist Party, but they were more intellectuals than revolutionaries. They were scholars who were attracted to new ideas, but they lacked the organizational skills as well as the knowledge of violent revolutionary tactics that Communist activities require.¹⁾

Similarly, the early beginning of the Japanese Communist movement can also be traced to Socialists and anarchists like Sakai Toshihiko and Osugi Sakae, who tried to introduce new ideas to the Japanese people and to bring about a new dawn in Japan. The first Japanese Communist group was called *Gyominkai*, the New Dawn Society.²⁾ They supported the interests of the oppressed and condemned the Japanese exploiting class, eventually advocating class struggle in Japan. The Japanese government authorities crushed these efforts that were directed against the ruling class of their own country.

In Korea, however, communism was introduced to the people not by intellectuals or leading scholars, as in China and Japan; and it was not brought in to fight the social stratification of traditional society so as to free the toiling masses from the exploitation of the Korean ruling class. Communism was introduced to Korea by Korean revolutionaries, who used this new idea from the very beginning, not to engage the oppressed of Korea in a class struggle but to fight the Japanese imperialists and regain Korean independence. It was not due to any persuasion by intellectuals using the teachings of Marx and Engels that communism took hold; it was simply that those Korean revolutionaries who showed an interest were ready to take up arms against the Japanese. The movement was organized and led by people who knew little about communism. Nor were they interested in learning about the

1) For the origin of the Chinese Communist movement, see Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951); and Allen S. Whiting, *Soviet Policies in China, 1917-1924* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953).

2) For the origin of the Japanese Communist movement, see Roger Swearingen and Paul Langer, *Red Flag in Japan; International Communism in Action, 1919-1952* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952).

theoretical aspects of communism and how its ideas could be implemented in Korean society. In the beginning, the Koreans were more interested in helping the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution so that they would be able to fight the Japanese later.

The first Korean Socialist Party, organized as early as June 1918 in the Soviet Far East, for example, was headed by a military man, a former army officer of the Korean kingdom, Yi Tong-hwi, a Christian who knew little about communism. Yi maintained close ties with Korean immigrant organizations in China and Russia, and he was able to bring patriotic Koreans together under the banner of communism in the name of Korean independence. He was, of course, helped by able Korean Communists like Pak Chin-sun, and as the Bolsheviks gained power in Russia, Yi and his compatriots also grew stronger. These Koreans eventually became Communists who subscribed to the idea of class struggle and propagated communism in Korea, but their beginning was less than auspicious.

Many Korean revolutionary groups fought on the side of the Bolsheviks, and there were a number of Koreans who fought gallantly for the Red Army in Siberia, such as Han Ch'ang-göl, Aleksandra Kim Stankevich, and Yi Yong. Because they actively supported the cause of the Red Army, Koreans played a prominent role in the initial stage of the Soviet effort to propagate communism in East Asia. For example, there were a number of Koreans who helped Boris Shumiatsky in his work in Irkutsk, and when G. Voitinskii came to Shanghai, Koreans worked closely with him. The Korean Communists also received funds from the Soviet Union to propagate communism in Korea, and they helped the Soviet agents in the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern to distribute funds among both Japanese and Chinese Communist organizations. Kondo Eizo, for example, related that he went to Shanghai to receive funds from Pak Chin-sun in May 1921.³⁷ It is also reported that the Far Eastern Bureau supported the Taiwan Communist Party through their agent in Tokyo, and the Bureau

also supported the Chinese Communist group in Shanghai in its initial stage.

Koreans also played an important role in the Comintern: they were the first among the East Asians to participate actively in Comintern activities. Pak Chin-sun, for example, was the first person of Asian descent to represent the Far East in the Executive Committee of the Communist International, and Pak's activities in the Comintern precede those of Katayama Sen of Japan and Chang Tailei of China. Pak also worked closely with Lenin, often proposing the more militant course of action. As long as the Koreans were proposing extremely radical, definitely anti-imperialist policy, they enjoyed the support of the Comintern and its agents working in the Far East.³⁾

The other Korean nationalist revolutionaries did not harbor any ill will toward Korean Communist revolutionaries, either. During the period of the Japanese occupation of Korea, Korean revolutionaries in general accepted, and at times even accommodated, Korean Communists in the fight against the Japanese to regain Korean independence. This can be seen in the election of Yi Tong-hwi, the founder of the Korean Communist Party, as the Prime Minister of the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai when Syngman Rhee was its President in 1919. Although the coalition between the Nationalists and the Communists did not succeed, they did not fight against each other.

There is a clear indication of this in the composition of the Korean delegation to the First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East in Moscow in January 1922. Many Korean Nationalists went to the Congress in search of Soviet support for their struggle for Korean independence. The Korean delegation consisted of such notable Korean Nationalists as Kim Kyu-sik, Yō Un-hyōng, Na Yong-gyun, Chang Kōn-sang,

3) Kondo Eizo, *Kominterun no misshi* [Secret Agent of the Comintern] (Tokyo: Bunka hyōronsha, 1949), pp.128-29.

4) E.J. Eudin and Robert C. North, *Soviet Russia and the East, 1920-1927: Documentary Survey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).

Kim wŏn-gyŏng, and Wŏn Se-hun. Korean Communists participated, of course, but representatives from such non-Communist organizations as the Patriotic Women's Association (Aeguk puinhoe) and the National Restoration Army (Kwangpokkun) also participated. In fact, the Korean delegation was the largest in the First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East with fifty-seven of the total 124 delegates, while China had only twenty-seven and Japan thirteen.⁵⁾

The Korean Nationalists expressed their inner feelings at this congress and none expressed them more clearly than Kim Kyu-sik, the chief delegate from Korea. Kim, who had been educated in the United States, condemned that country by saying that "even the great republic of [the United States of] America, which has made so much ado about its altruistic pretenses and its world-wide democratic principles, threw off its mask at the Washington Conference when it formed the hideous quadruple agreement with the three notorious bloodsucker nations." Kim continued to express his appreciation to the Soviet Union by saying that the First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East "gave expression to the need for the peoples of East Asia to come together," and concluded his appeal by directly stating his case. Kim said that "Korean independence must be achieved with the assistance of Russia."⁶⁾

The cooperation and accommodation between the Nationalists and the Communists persisted not only in the beginning but throughout the trials and tribulations of the Communists. Examples are many, such as the defense of Korean Communists by Nationalist lawyers in the 1920s and the 1930s, and the coalition of the Nationalists and the Communists in the Sin'ganhoe. At times even the foreign Christian missionaries helped Korean Communists in their fight for Korean independence from

5) *The First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East* (Petrograd, 1922), p. 237.

6) For the full text of Kim Kyu-sik's article, see Kim Kyu-sik, "The Asiatic Revolutionary Movement and Imperialism," *Communist Review* 3, no. 3 (July 1922) : 137-47.

Japan. When the Korean revolutionary group was split into the Nationalist group and the Communist group in China, the Korean Nationalists and Communists did not fight amongst themselves. There were no open conflicts, for example, between the Korean Provisional Government with its Korean Restoration Army and the Korean Independence League with its military unit, the Korean Volunteer Corps, that was established in the Chinese Communist base at Yanan. The sharp division and intense animosity between the Communist and non-Communist Koreans are the products of the partition of Korea and the perpetuation of this division, and the Korean War.

II. Relationship with the Comintern

With the origins of their movement abroad, the Korean Communist revolutionaries all tried to establish a Communist party in the Korean peninsula, but Korea was under tight Japanese colonial rule, and the suppression of subversive organizations including Communists was intense. Unlike the Chinese and the Japanese Communists, who were able to operate in their own countries, the Korean revolutionaries, both Communist and Nationalist, had to conduct their revolutionary activities abroad, their members scattered in a number of neighboring countries, and since Japanese rule lasted more than three decades, many revolutionaries became residents of the countries where they had settled. These Koreans, who tried to penetrate the Japanese security networks and bring new ideas into Korea, were called "recalcitrant" Koreans by the Japanese. Few escaped Japanese police scrutiny, and as the Japanese empire expanded into Manchuria and China, so did their measures of control over the recalcitrant Koreans.

What the Comintern wanted from the Korean revolutionaries in China, Manchuria, and the Soviet Far East was a Communist revolution within Korea. The Comintern did recognize the activities of many Korean settlers in the Soviet Far East and their commitment to the

cause of communism, and they knew too well various organizations and groups engaged in factional strife amongst them. Comintern agents often mediated between the Koreans fighting other Koreans in the Soviet Far East, as in the Alexeyevsk Incident.⁷⁾ The Comintern issued a six-point directive in April 1922 to settle the Korean problem in the Soviet Far East, and the fifth point emphasized that the Koreans should establish a Communist party within Korea.

It took the Korean revolutionaries more than three years after the First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East to establish a Communist party in Seoul. The Korean Communist Party was founded on April 17, 1925, and it was subsequently admitted to the Comintern as a section together with Cuba, New Zealand, Paraguay, Colombia, Ecuador, and the Irish Workers' League at its sixth congress in 1928.⁸⁾ The Comintern had been aware of the establishment of the Korean Communist Party, and the record of the ECCI (Executive Committee of the Communist International) revealed that the Comintern had been informed of the establishment as early as 1926, between the sixth and seventh plenums. Subsequently twenty-one Korean Communists were sent to KUTV [Communist University of the Toilers of the East] for study. The rector of the KUTV from 1926 to 1928 was Boris Shumiatsky, who knew the Koreans well, and there were a few instructors and officials in the University who were Soviet-Koreans, among them Ch'oe Sǒng-u [Tsoy Shenu], Chu Ch'ǒng-song, and Kim Sǒng-t'aek.

7) The Alexeyevsk Incident is also known as the Free City Incident, or *Chayusi sagǒn* in Korea. There are many articles and references to this incident. See a study by Hara Teruyuki, "Roshiya kakumei, Shiberia sensō to Chōsen tokuritsu undō" [The Russian Revolution, the Siberian War, and the Korean Independence Movement] in *Roshiya kakumeiron* (Tokyo: Tabata shoten, 1977), pp. 171-216.

8) "Resolution on the Admittance of the Communist Parties of Cuba, Korea, New Zealand and Paraguay, of the Irish Workers' League, the Socialist Party of Ecuador and the Revolutionary Socialist Party of Colombia into the Communist International," *Inprecor* 8, no. 83 (November 1928): 15-79.

Some of the early Korean students included Cho Yong-am (brother of Cho Pong-am), Kim Myōng-si (sister of Kwōn O-sōl), Ko Myōng-ja and Kim Cho-i (wives of Kim Tan-ya and Cho Pong-am, respectively), Kim To-yōp (nephew of Kim Yak-su), Kwōn O-jik, Kim Chang-ha (daughter of Yi Tong-hwi), O Ki-sōp, Chu Yōng-ha, and others.⁹⁾

Within Korea, however, four Communist parties rose and fell in rapid succession from 1925 to 1928, and because of their successive failures, the Comintern issued a number of directives, instructing the correct cause of action. The Comintern directives to the Far Eastern countries in general are known to have had little relevance to the real condition of various Communist operations, and the Korean case was no exception. For example, the December Thesis of 1928 that was known to have been written by the Committee of Four (Wiltanen, Mif, Qu Qiubai, and Sano Manabu) had little relevance to the realities of actual Communist operations in Korea.¹⁰⁾ What the Koreans needed at this time was to devise more efficient strategies to combat the relentless Japanese thought police in order to prolong their organized party activities; if there were problems, they were not because Korea lacked industrial workers or because the Korean Communists had failed to use Korean peasants. At the time that the Thesis was written, the Korean Communists believed that the ECCI had expelled the Korean Communist Party from the Comintern. This was not true. The Comintern, in fact, had approved the Korean Communist Party as a section only three months earlier at the Sixth Congress. Such a misunderstanding, more than anything else, indicates the lack of close ties between the Korean Communist Party and the Comintern. None of the four who had a hand in writing the thesis knew anything about Korea and the struggle

9) For a description of the KUTV, see Kazama Jokichi, *Mosko kyōsan daigaku no omoite* [Memoirs of Moscow Communist University] (Tokyo: Sangensha, 1949), pp. 74-190.

10) The December Thesis of 1928 is available in many languages including Korean, Japanese, Russian, and English. See the English version in *In-precor* 9, no. 8 (February 1929): 130-33.

of the Korean Communists under the Japanese. Nor did the Comintern dispatch any of its agents to Korea to gain firsthand knowledge of Korea.

In 1931, Otto Kuusinen, a Finnish member of the ECCI, also issued a directive to the Korean Communists known as Kuusinen's Thesis,¹¹⁾ which attributed the cause of the defeat of Korean communism to the incessant infighting among various Korean Communist factions; but in truth, there were no organized activities by any Communist faction within Korea, and those Communists who had fled Korea had joined non-Korean revolutionary groups, such as the Chinese and Japanese Communist parties. Kuusinen's Thesis did not help Koreans to revive their movement in Korea, nor did it spark the rise of any new struggle among the peasants or industrial workers.

At the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935, a Korean Communist named Kim Ha-il addressed the Congress on behalf of the Initiatory Group of the Korean Communists. By this time, the Korean Communist groups were so scattered and fragmented that it is difficult to identify which group Kim represented or who Kim Ha-il was.¹²⁾ Kim seems to have been a Soviet-Korean who represented the Korean Communist group in the Soviet Far East. In this fashion, the ties between the Korean Communists and the Comintern, which had begun with a strong and militant alliance, dwindled down to negligible contact.

There was no one in the Comintern headquarters who represented the Korean Communists either officially or unofficially. Even after the dissolution of the Comintern, there was not one in the Communist

11) The Kuusinen Thesis of 1931 is available in Russian and Japanese. See the English translation in my earlier study, *Documents of Korean Communism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). The Russian original is available in *Revoliutsionnyi Vostok*, nos. 11-12 (1931): 99-115.

12) For a detailed study of the Korean representation in various Comintern Congresses, see Mizuno Naoki, "Komminterun to Chōsen" [The Comintern and Korea] in *Chōsen minzoku undōshi kenkyū*, no. 1 (1984): 71-120.

Party of the Soviet Union who knew much about Korea or who handled the Korean problem in particular. Nor did Stalin groom anyone to realize his future designs on Communist Korea as he did for East European countries. In general, the Soviet Union was more interested in Eastern Europe than in Asia. The Korean Communists, on their part, also failed to maintain close ties with the Soviet Union. To be sure, there were more Koreans in the Soviet Union than Chinese or Japanese, but most of the Koreans became Soviet citizens and settled there with no plans to return to Korea to lead the Communist revolution. In fact, those Soviet-Koreans who eventually returned to Korea after World War II were mostly minor local party officials and school teachers, and none was a prominent member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

III. The Problem of Leadership

The Korean Communist movement did not have a leader with whom the movement could be identified. There were so many leaders, and they came and went in such rapid succession that it is not generally known today who were the actual leaders of the movement. Those who study communism in Asia can easily identify one or two key Communist leaders of China, Japan, Vietnam, and even Indonesia, but few can identify the leaders of the Korean Communist movement. Even among Koreans in both the North and the South, only a handful of scholars will be able to identify, for example, the chairman of the first Korean Communist Party, which was established in Seoul in April 1925.

This is due in part to the successful control of Korean Communist activity by the Japanese police. In their effort to escape police harassment, many Korean Communist leaders fled Korea and remained abroad for a long period of time. Yi Tong-hwi, for example, died in the Soviet Far East in January 1935 without truly contributing much to the establishment of the Korean Communist Party in Seoul. Pak Chin-sun,

who once had worked so closely with Lenin and directed the affairs of the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern, was not known to the Koreans at home. Pak did not return to Korea and died in the Soviet Union. There were other group leaders who were rivals to Yi Tonghwi, such as Kim Ch'ol-hun and Mun Ch'ang-bōm, but all of them retired in the Soviet Union as Soviet citizens.¹³⁾

The first chairman of the Korean Communist Party in Seoul, in April 1925, was Kim Chae-bong, a man not very well known to the Korean people or even to Korean revolutionaries. Kim was a journalist from Andong, Kyōngsang pukto, and he studied Marxism in Shanghai at An Pyōng-ch'an's research center. Kim was the leader of the Tuesday Association group, which successfully penetrated the Japanese security network to establish the party in Korea. He was later arrested for his part and executed. The second chairman of the Korean Communist Party was Kang Tal-yōng, another journalist. Kang was the chief of the branch office of the *Chosŏn ilbo* in Chinju, and he took over the party and managed what became known as the June 10 Incident of 1926. When he was arrested by the Japanese, he was tortured until he became insane, but he did not capitulate and died in prison.¹⁴⁾

There were many leaders for the third party, because the third Communist party attempted to establish a united front with the Nationalist groups by advocating a change in direction. These included Yi Yōng,

13) For the Korean revolutionaries who fought in the Soviet Far East, there is good biographical information by Matevei T. Kim. See M. T. Kim, *Koreiski internatsionalistiv borbe za vlasti Sovetov na Dalinem Vostoke, 1918-1922* [The Struggle of Korean Internationalists for Soviet Rule in the Far East] (1979).

14) For the Korean Communist movement, see, among others, my earlier study *The Korean Communist Movement, 1918-1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Robert A. Scalapino and Chong-sik Lee, *Communism in Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Kim Chun-yōp and Kim Ch'ang-sun, *Han'guk kongsan chu'ui undongsa* (Seoul: Asea munje yōn'guso, 1979); and Kim Chōng-myōng, *Chōsen dokuritsu undō* (Tokyo: Hara shobō, 1967).

Kim Ch'öl-su, An Kwang-ch'ön, Kim Chun-yön, and Han Wi-gön. They were returned students from Japan who had little or no connection with other Koreans from abroad. The fourth party chairman was Ch'a Küm bong, a labor leader who organized the first mutual assistance group for laborers in Korea, *Nodong kongjehoe*. After the collapse of organized activity, the Korean Communists carried on sporadic resistance from the late 1920s to the early 1930s, at times helped by the returned students from the KUTV. Two notable efforts were led by Kim Ch'öl-su and Han Wi-gön, but none of the leaders of this period were to emerge as the dominant leader of the Korean Communist movement. There is thus no one individual with whom the Korean Communist movement can be identified.

After the liberation of Korea, the person who eventually emerged as the leader of the Korean Communist Party was Pak Hön-yöng. Pak was the first chairman of the Korean Communist Youth Association at its founding congress in April 1925, but after the collapse of the first party in November of that year, he was replaced by Kwön O-söl. Pak was arrested, tortured, imprisoned, and hospitalized as a mental patient. He escaped and remained underground without submitting to the Japanese, but he did not head any Korean Communist group until after the liberation of Korea. He was easily challenged. When the Korean Communist Party merged with New Democratic Party (Sinmindang) and the People's Party (Inmindang) to form the Workers' Party of South Korea, it was still another leader, Hō Hōn, and not Pak Hön-yöng who became chairman. In North Korea also, when the Workers' Party of North Korea was first organized by uniting the New Democratic Party and the Korean Communist Party in the North, it was Kim Tu-bong of the Yanan group, the New Democratic Party, who became chairman, and the representative of the Korean Communist Party, Chu Yöng-ha, was relegated to the third position behind Kim II Sung, who had no political roots in Korea. ¹⁵⁾

15) For Communist operations in the South shortly after the liberation, see

It was the rapid succession of new leaders that deprived the Korean Communist movement of the ability to develop and sustain any continuity. None of these Korean Communist leaders was a prominent figure in the Korean revolutionary movement, except perhaps Yi Tong-hwi, who was the Prime Minister of the Korean Provisional Government. Nor did any Communist leader become a prominent figure in the Korean revolutionary movement. Many died in prison, and many more fled Korea to settle abroad. Some even recanted and renounced communism, as did Cho Pong-am and Kim Chun-yŏn. Others, such as Kim Ch'ŏl-su, refrained from any further Communist activities when the Korean Communist Party was merged to found the Workers' Party of South Korea.

The leadership problem in the Korean Communist movement can be attributed to a number of causes. Foremost was the effective Japanese suppression of Korean Communist activity both at home and abroad. The Japanese thought police were very efficient in putting the leaders away. Another cause was related to the region of operation. Korean Communist activity was scattered over geographically large areas, covering the Korean peninsula, China, Manchuria, the Soviet Union, and Japan. The regional centers created small groups under less prominent leaders with factional tendencies, making the coordination of their activities difficult, if at all possible. The leader of the Manchurian General Bureau of the Korean Communist Party, Ch'oe Wŏn-t'aek, for example, may not have had any contact with the leader of the Korean Communists working within the Japanese Communist Party, Kim Ch'ŏn-hae. Those who conducted their revolutionary activities in mainland China with the Chinese Communists in Yanan, such as Kim Tu-bong, Pak Il-u, and Mu Chŏng, had a different orientation from the Com-

Kim Nam-sik, *Sillok namnodang* [The True Records of the Workers' Party of South Korea] (Seoul: Sin hyŏnsilsa, 1975). For the roster of other leaders of various party congresses, see my earlier study, *Korean Communism, 1945-1980* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981).

munists in Korea. Thus, when they returned to Korea after liberation, these groups formed separate parties.

Still another cause can be found in the Korean Communist leaders themselves. Most of these leaders were trained neither in theory nor in the strategy and tactics of communism. Most of the leaders who headed the Korean Communist parties in Korea were newspaper reporters, writers, and returned students who had less than adequate training in the organizational and operational skills essential to Communist activity. Of course, such training in Communist theory may not have guaranteed success, but in any event the Korean Communist movement lacked a theoretician who could prescribe how communism should be domesticated for Korea.

Because of the problem of leadership in the Korean Communist movement, it was easy for Kim Il Sung, for example, who had had no part in the movement, to take the leadership away from Pak Hŏn-yŏng. Because of the lack of a charismatic or dominant leader who could unite the various segments of the Korean Communist movement such as the Yanan group and the Korean Communists at home, Kim Il Sung was able to assume a dominant role, playing one group against another. When these groups challenged Kim Il Sung's leadership in the North, they were not united; they all challenged him separately only to meet their downfall.

IV. The Challenges

In contrast to the effective operation of the Japanese thought police in suppressing the spread of communism in Korea, the Korean Communists, in challenging the Japanese, made too many tactical errors to be successful. The first of these was in the lack of training for Communist revolutionaries to be more effective in their undertakings. All during the period of the successive defeats of the four separate Communist party organizations in the 1920s, the Korean Communists were

not able to devise a strategy to meet the requirements of an underground Communist operation. Their activities were more adventurous than disciplined, and they failed to devise a way to counter the successive arrests of either their leaders or the rank and file.

Basically they were undisciplined in the ways of recruitment and training, and for the challenges that they undertook, their strategy was too elementary to be successful. This can easily be seen in the Sinūiju incident of 1925 which brought an end to the first party, and the June 10 incident in 1926 which revealed the operation of the second party.¹⁶⁾ When Communist activity became impractical within the Korean peninsula, the Korean Communists went abroad and operated in many neighboring regions; for example, there was the Manchurian General Bureau in Northeast China, the Korean Independence League in Yanan, the Initiatory Group in the Soviet Far East, and many small groups operating in Japan. All these were small undertakings of little consequence, and they were conducted under the leadership of foreign parties. Limited success was achieved, such as in the Jiandao May 30 Incident in 1930, but no efforts were made to coordinate the activities of these groups under the rubric of one Korean Communist organization.

Another tactical error was committed after the liberation of Korea. The Korean Communist Party that became the organization of all Korean Communists in liberated Korea concentrated its activities only in the southern half of the peninsula, leaving the northern half to those who had played little or no part in past Korean Communist activities. The Soviet Red Army, the military unit of the country that had championed the cause of communism throughout the world, occupied the northern half, and it would have been more prudent for the Korean Communist party to have consolidated its forces under Soviet direction

16) For the details of these and other incidents, see any standard work on the Korean Communist movement, for example, Robert Scalapino and Chong-sik Lee, *op. cit.*; Kim Chōng-myōng, *op. cit.*; Tsuboe Senji, *Chōsen minzoku dokuritsu undō hishi* [Secret History of the Korean Independence Movement] (Tokyo: Nikkan rōdōsha, 1959).

in the North than under the American occupation authorities in the South. It is known that the Soviet occupation forces came into Korea with a preconceived formula for the Sovietization of the North, and the chances of their success were much greater in the North than in the South.¹⁷⁾

When they first arrived in Pyongyang, the Soviet occupation forces had to deal with such non-Communist leaders as Cho Man-sik, and not Pak Hŏn-yŏng. The headquarters of the Korean Communist Party should have been in Pyongyang and not in Seoul. When Hyŏn Chun-hyŏk was assassinated in late September 1945, the Korean Communists should have moved up to the North and united with the local North Korean Communist forces in Hamgyŏngdo, whose leadership included O Ki-sŏp and Chŏng Tal-hyŏn. The Korean Communist Party should also have taken the initiative to unite the Korean revolutionaries and their military unit returning from Yanan. Instead, most of the leaders remained in Seoul, engaging in factional strife among themselves. They should not have engaged in the discussion of their future with the American occupation authorities in the South but with the Soviet occupation authorities in the North. They should not have been publishing the *Haebang ilbo* [Liberation Daily] in Seoul but rather the *Nodong sinmun* [Workers' Daily] in Pyongyang.

It is true that Kim Il Sung had Soviet blessings in taking control of the interim administrative units in the North, but he was vulnerable. Kim returned to Korea without any political roots there. He had neither the control of the Yanan group nor the full cooperation of the Soviet-Koreans. Hŏ Ka-i, for example, was one of the first to confront Kim in the North. All that Kim could truly count on were the Soviet occu-

17) For the Soviet occupation of North Korea, see a Soviet study on the subject, *Osvobozhdenie Korei* [Korean Liberation] (Moskva: Akademii Nauk, 1976). For an American study by the U.S. State Department, see *North Korea: A Case Study in the Technique of Takeover* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961).

pation authorities, who withdrew in December 1948, and his partisan guerrillas from Manchuria, who numbered less than two hundred. Kim's position was challengeable in the 1940s, but only a small group of local leaders like O Ki-söp in Hamgyöngdo did actually challenge Kim. O, for example, insisted that the trade unions play an important role in North Korea, asserting that the workers should be unionized and given the right to strike against the state even if it was a Socialist state.¹⁸⁾ The rights of the workers should be guaranteed. Kim Il Sung countered O's assertion with the observation that a Socialist or Communist state is a country of the workers, and to strike against such a Socialist state constituted a direct challenge to it and was therefore unacceptable. Even in this sort of confrontation on basic theoretical issues, the central party leaders in the South did not support O's position.

Even after the Korean Communist Party belatedly moved to the North, the leaders of the Korean Communist Party and the Workers' Party of South Korea were given the impossible task of inciting Communist revolution in the South. The leaders from the South were not engaged in the struggle to control the party or government operations in the North. It was only after separate governments were established in both North and South Korea that the Communist leaders from the South were given government positions in the North, and they were gradually incorporated into the political scene in the North.

Kim Il Sung's position was tenuous in the beginning. The party was headed by Kim Tu-bong, and some of his partisans, Ch'oe Yong-gön, for example, joined other political parties. The most powerful Standing Committee of the Central Committee of the Communist Party had only one other partisan aside from Kim Il Sung: Kim Ch'aek. There were

18) For O Ki-söp's article on the role of the Korean trade unions, see *Nodong sinmun*, September 18, 1946. For Kim's speech see *Puk Chosön nodongdang che ich'a chöndang taehoe hoeüirok* [Minutes of the Second Congress of the Workers' Party of North Korea] (Pyongyang: Puk Chosön nodongdang chungang wiwönhoe, 1948).

only four partisans (Kim Il Sung, Kim Il, Kim Ch'aek, and An Kil) in the forty-three-man Central Committee of the first congress of the Workers' Party. Also, in his first twenty-member cabinet, only two ministers (Kim Ch'aek and Ch'oe Yong-gŏn) were partisans, and even these two were partisans who had operated in northern Manchuria, a region quite some distance away from Kim's operational areas in the south and southeastern regions. To illustrate dramatically the kind of people Kim Il Sung had to work with in the beginning of his administration, there was a non-Communist revolutionary, Yi Kŭk-no, who became a member of Kim's first cabinet and who once wrote to General Wedemeyer after the end of World War II and that "all Koreans hate communism."¹⁹ Kim Il Sung's success in the North is due in part to his ability and in part to fate, but it was also due to the strategic errors committed by the Korean Communists after the liberation of Korea.

During the Korean War, the old Communists finally challenged and tried to overthrow Kim Il Sung and his government by military means. They took this move alone without consulting other groups with more military experience, such as the Yanan group or the Soviet-Koreans, and in so doing, they committed the ultimate tactical error. When the Korean War did not bring unification under communism, the group of Pak Hŏn-yŏng supporters headed by Yi Sŭng-yŏp mobilized approximately 3,900 men and challenged Kim in early 1953. They tried and failed to bring down the government of Kim Il Sung and replace Kim with Pak Hŏn-yŏng. The conspirators were all arrested; ten leaders (Yi Sŭng-yŏp, Cho Il-myŏng, Yim Hwa, Pak Sŭng-wŏn, Yi Kang-guk, Pae Ch'ŏl, Paek Haeng-bok, Cho Yong-bek, Maeng Chong-ho, and Sŏl Chŏng-sik) were executed, and two (Yun Sun-dal and Yi Wŏn-jo),

19) Handwritten letter by Yi Kŭk-no addressed to General Wedemeyer, who was sent to the Far East by President Truman to assess the condition there. The letter is available in the National Archives of the United States.

who were given jail terms, died in prison. The Procurator-General who prosecuted these men was Kim Il Sung's partisan, Yi Song-un, and all the conspirators were sentenced to terms demanded by the prosecutor, a fate reminiscent of what had happened to the Korean Communists during the Japanese colonial period.

At the trial, Pae Ch'öl, who was alleged to have mobilized the troops to attack Kim Il Sung's group, was asked how much military training he had had to undertake such a task, and he replied that he had received none. None of the conspirators possessed any military training. Kim Il Sung had been a partisan guerrilla fighter for at least ten years and had been the supreme commander of the North Korean army when the Korean War was still in progress. Some of the conspirators were writers, such as Söl Chŏng-sik, an American-educated leftist writer who published anti-Soviet Red Army poems, and Yim Hwa, who tried to commit suicide when his plot was uncovered. All the conspirators confessed to everything that they were charged with and did not protest or contend any point of prosecution — even the false charges.²⁰⁾

Toward the end of the trial, Pak Sŭng-wŏn lamented that every revolutionary has a country that he can die for or that he can call his own, but he could claim none. He could not die for the non-Communist South, and he could not now call the North his own country. Pak, perhaps, expressed most eloquently the fate of the Korean Communists. Their trial and execution marked the end of the old Korean Communist movement, because those from the old movement who remained in the North stayed at the pleasure of Kim Il Sung. When Kim began to promote his revolutionary past as the true Korean Communist history and denounced all others, these earlier Communists pledged complete loyalty to Kim and his system.

20) The record of the trial appears in *Nodong sinmun*, August 5, 6, 7, and 8, 1953. See also two Japanese books about the incident: *Bokareta imbō* [The Uncovered Plot] (Tokyo: Judaisha, 1954); and Matsumoto Seicho, *Kita no shijin* [Poet of the North] (Tokyo: Kobunsha, 1967).

V. The Discontinuity

The most significant characteristic of the Korean Communist movement is its discontinuity. None of the old Korean Communists and their record of Communist struggle are recognized in the North. Kim Il Sung never participated in the old Korean Communist movement, and the entire movement was in fact denounced by him. There is no record of the old Korean Communist leaders and their movement in North Korea, because Kim began to promote his own guerrilla activities as the true tradition of the Korean Communist revolution. It is not only the non-recognition of the past Korean Communist movement, but the promotion of the non-Korean record of his own revolutionary past that has brought about the sharp discontinuity in the Korean Communist movement.

Kim Il Sung's guerrilla records are not all manufactured, fabricated tales as some South Koreans claim, and he was responsible for some important victories against the Japanese police as a Communist revolutionary. However, it was in the Chinese Communist guerrilla army that he fought—in the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army under the Chinese commander Yang Jing-yu, as one of their own.²¹⁾ The purpose of the anti-Japanese struggle by the Chinese was to drive the Japanese out of Manchuria and bring communism to China. Kim did contribute significantly to this struggle, and he gained a repu-

21) There are many accounts by both Chinese and Japanese on the activities of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army. See Dongbei lieshi jinianguan, ed., *Dongbei kangri lieshichuan* [Biographies of Northeast Anti-Japanese Fighters], 3 Vols. (Harbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 1980). For the Japanese account, see *Gendaishi shiryō* [Sources of Modern History], Vol. 30 (Tokyo: Misuzu shobō, 1976). For North Korean accounts, see *Hangil ppalchisan Ch'amgaja dül ūi hoesanggi* [Reminiscences of the Anti-Japanese Partisan Guerrillas] (Pyongyang: Chosŏn nodongdang ch'ulp'ansa, 1959-1969).

tation as a talented guerrilla who fought gallantly against the Japanese under significant odds, but he did not fight for Korea, nor did he ever join any Korean Communist group.

What Kim claims today is that the beginning of his guerrilla activity in April 1932 constituted the beginning of the Korean Communist movement. The date of the founding of this alleged guerrilla unit is now celebrated as the founding of the entire North Korean army. Kim has now changed the name of the United Army to the Korean People's Revolutionary Army, putting himself in the position of supreme commander from the beginning. Kim also claims that he fought the Japanese to the bitter end in Manchuria and defeated them and returned to Korea victorious after the end of World War II in 1945. Kim's son has built for his father an Arch of Triumph on the spot where Kim Il Sung made his first speech after his victorious return to Korea.²²⁾

There are many problems with Kim's effort to legitimize his past guerrilla record in the Chinese Communist United Army in Manchuria as the true and only record of the Korean Communist movement. To be sure, the old Korean Communist movement was not a resounding success, and in fact it ended in defeat, but to replace it with something totally alien to the Korean Communist movement was worse than admitting defeat. The claim has divided and disjointed the entire Korean Communist movement. Kim's exaggeration of his past record and his claim for victory in every battle he fought deserve no refutation, but the discontinuity in the development of the Korean Communist movement should be recognized.

Kim's success in the North should be analyzed in the context of the past defeats and failures of the Korean Communists and not on the record that was fabricated to make it seem as if Kim fought in the

22) This Arch of Triumph is slightly larger than the one in Paris. It is reported that Kim's son built this for his father as a sign of loyalty to him (Nada Takashi, *A Paean of Great Love: Kim Jong Il and the People* [Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1984]).

Korean revolutionary group and was ever-victorious. There is really nothing wrong with Kim's good record of guerrilla struggle in the Chinese Communist army; there were also other Koreans who fought in the Chinese army, but they should all be recognized for their contribution to the Chinese Communist revolution. Kim's Korean record in the North, too, deserves recognition, and Kim can easily claim victory for his long and absolute rule of four decades. What is more important is the fact that the system he built in North Korea resembles more a government to accommodate his personal authoritarian rule than a dictatorship of the proletariat in Korea.