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“Our Common Struggle against  
Our Common Enemy”:  
North Korea and the American Radical Left

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## **“Our Common Struggle against Our Common Enemy”: North Korea and the American Radical Left**

Introduction by Benjamin R. Young

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the Black Panther Party (BPP) came together under the rubric of “our common struggle against our common enemy.” *The Black Panther*, the official organ of the BPP, produced a steady stream of commentary favorable to the DPRK, Kim Il Sung, and the *Juche* ideology. Eldridge Cleaver, the leader of the BPP’s international affairs sector, often lauded the DPRK as an “earthly paradise” and stressed that the North Koreans were “the first to bring the U.S. imperialists trembling to their knees” ([Document No. 8](#)). Though other American leftist groups were drawn to North Korea during the “long 1960s,” the BPP established perhaps the most firm connection with the North Koreans.<sup>1</sup> The DPRK’s links to the American radical left have long been known, but the motivations behind this alliance—both those of Pyongyang and the BPP—have never been clear, and a deeper analysis of this relationship has long been absent.<sup>2</sup> The documents introduced here and presented below, gathered from the personal papers of Eldridge Cleaver, demonstrate that the American radical left regarded Pyongyang as an important alternative from Moscow and Beijing. Likewise, these materials also show that North Korea regarded the American radicals as a cherished ally in its worldwide struggle to create an anti-imperialist front against the United States and to reunify the Korean peninsula.

The available documentary evidence, pieced together from the archives of the University of California, Berkeley, and Texas A&M University, revolves around Cleaver’s two trips to North Korea in 1969 and 1970 and his representation of the country “as a beacon in the vanguard of the struggling masses of the world” ([Document No. 7](#)). These documents also capture Cleaver’s fascination with the “*Juche* spirit.” Cleaver defined *Juche* as being a “creative stand, mean[ing] to develop and apply Marxism-Leninism to one’s own revolutionary conditions” ([Document No. 3](#)). The BPP hoped to adopt the “*Juche* spirit” for the eventual revolution inside of the United States and regarded Kim Il Sung’s ideology as a potent tool for the international communist movement.

In September 1969, Eldridge Cleaver travelled to Pyongyang along with the BPP’s deputy minister of defense Byron Booth for the “International Conference on Tasks of Journalists of the Whole World in their Fight against U.S. Imperialist Aggression.” This conference signaled the beginning of the BPP’s relationship with the DPRK. During the conference in North Korea, Cleaver kept notes on what he witnessed and heard from both North Korean spokespersons as well as other delegates from the communist world ([Document No. 1](#)). Cleaver, explaining why the BPP was eager to establish linkages with “revolutionary” countries such as North Korea, recorded to himself that, “the revolutionary forces inside the United States must be supported by the revolutionary peoples of the whole world because the people outside of the United States will slice the tentacles of the hideous octopus of U.S. oppression. The revolutionaries inside the United States will cut out its imperialist heart and give the decisive death blow to U.S. fascism and imperialism” ([Document No. 1](#)). Publicly, Cleaver and the BPP praised the DPRK as a socialist paradise and stated confidently that North Koreans “have no worries about food, clothing, lodging, education, medicine” and that they “work til [*sic*] hearts

content leading a happy life” ([Document No. 4](#)). In his 1978 retrospective work, *Soul on Fire*, Eldridge Cleaver explained that “at first” he “was amazed at the grit and zeal of the young communists of North Korea” and that “some of the most zealous had entered into a compact or vow that they would not marry or have sexual relations until their country was united with South Korea.”<sup>3</sup> North Korea, despite its “subtle brainwashing and unsubtle racism,” had clearly impressed Eldridge Cleaver.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to solidifying its own ties with the DPRK, the BPP also tried to rally other revolutionary organizations to the North Korean cause ([Document No. 2](#)). In a letter (written in September 5, 1969) to the BPP’s Chief of Staff, David Hilliard, Eldridge Cleaver explained that the Panthers shall “call upon all revolutionary organizations to also send telegrams to express their solidarity with the fighting Korean people in the face of new aggressions being plotted against the Korean peoples by the imperialists” ([Document No. 2](#)). Moreover, in 1970, Cleaver invited white radical Robert Scheer to attend another anti-imperialist journalist conference in Pyongyang ([Document No. 5](#)). Cleaver and Scheer organized a delegation to represent the United States at the conference, bringing with them ten members of various leftist organizations, including the Movement for a Democratic Military, San Francisco’s Red Guard, and an activist film collective, NEWSREEL ([Document No. 4](#)). In May 1970, Eldridge even sent his wife, Kathleen Cleaver, and their son, Maceo to North Korea. In Pyongyang, Kathleen gave birth to a baby girl, Joju Younghi, on July 31, 1970.<sup>5</sup>

What is perhaps most interesting about the documents is that they reveal how North Korea, despite persistently targeting the United States as its main enemy and denouncing the presence of US troops in South Korea, was able to establish a clear division between the so-called U.S. imperialists and U.S. allies. Cleaver himself was emphatic that “the BPP joins hands with the 40 million Korean people in our common struggle against our common enemy- the fascist, imperialist United States government and ruling class” ([Document No. 7](#)). North Korea regarded the American radical left as an important partner during this period and believed the BPP could help sway U.S. public opinion in favor of the DPRK. While the North Koreans ultimately failed to capture the hearts of the U.S. masses, these documents shed light on a forgotten chapter in the history of relations between the United States and North Korea.

Because Cleaver often repeated what he had read, heard, and seen during his travels to the DPRK, the documents provided here also offer a glimpse into North Korean state propaganda during this period. For example, Cleaver stated that, “Comrade Kim Il Sung is the most relevant strategist in the struggle against U.S. fascism and imperialism in the world today and he has put the correct tactical line for the universal destruction of fascism and imperialism in our time” ([Document No. 1](#)). Similar statements could be found in North Korean propaganda during this period.<sup>6</sup> While these documents may seem to be a simple reproduction of North Korean rhetoric, they also depict how North Korean propagandists attempted to establish Kim Il Sung as a leading Asian communist and theoretician.<sup>7</sup> From 1966 through 1976, the Cultural Revolution had engulfed Communist China and, to some degree, isolated Mao Zedong from the international communist movement. As a result, U.S. radicals accepted, to a certain extent, Kim Il Sung’s status as the new leading Asian communist and theoretician. North Korea, and in turn the BPP, elevated Kim Il Sung to the level of renowned socialist theorists such as Engels, Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. Cleaver typed in his notes that, “Comrade Kim Il Sung is one of the outstanding leaders of [the] world revolutionary movement.” ([Document No. 3](#)). In addition to situating Kim Il Sung as a prominent socialist thinker, Cleaver also believed that the, “Motherland of Marxism

is Germany; Motherland of Leninism is Russia; Motherland of Marxism-Leninism in our era is Korea” ([Document No. 3](#)). In the face of Sino-Soviet rivalry, the Cultural Revolution in China, and Soviet revisionism ([Document No. 1](#)), North Korea was a figurative escape valve for the BPP and other revolutionary organizations searching for communist leadership.

While most of these documents focus on the BPP’s depiction of the DPRK, a 1970 welcome message from the “The Committee for the Peaceful Unification of the Fatherland” also demonstrates how the North Koreans regarded their American friends. In a message addressed to Robert Scheer, Eldridge Cleaver, and Kathleen Cleaver, an anonymous North Korean speaker explained that “the struggle of the Black people and progressive people in America against U.S. imperialism is an important link in the chain of the anti-imperialist struggle of the peoples across the world and a great assistance to the revolutionary cause of the Korean people” ([Document No. 6](#)). Despite the relative dearth of scholarship on North Korea’s internationalism, Charles K. Armstrong has previously argued that “the late 1960s and 1970s were a time of unprecedented outward expansion for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, during this period, North Korean officials viewed the American radical left as an important ally in their worldwide fight against the U.S. imperialists.

The documents presented here demonstrate that the Black Panthers regarded North Korea as an “earthly paradise” and “Comrade Kim Il Sung” as a “genius” ([Document No. 9](#)). In an attempt to spread the *Juche* ideology and promote the North Korean cause for reunification, the BPP promoted the reading of the “political, theoretical, and philosophical writings of Comrade Kim Il Sung” in the United States ([Document No. 9](#)). Most significantly, the BPP’s fascination with North Korea reveals that Cold War international history cannot be understood merely in terms of nation-states alone. Non-state actors, such as the BPP, need to be given greater agency in the complex history of this era, and the documents presented here are among the first resources which allow us to do so.

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**Benjamin R. Young** is a Master’s degree student in world history at The College at Brockport, working on his thesis, “Juche in the USA: The Black Panther Party’s Experiences and Relations with North Korea, 1969-1971,” and intends to continue at the doctoral level. His main interests are Cold War international history with a focus on North Korea, Maoist China, the Black Power movement, the radical 1960s, and Marxism in the Third World. He can be reached at [byoun3@brockport.edu](mailto:byoun3@brockport.edu).

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## DOCUMENT LIST

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### DOCUMENT NO. 1

#### **Eldridge Cleaver Notebooks, September 1969**

*[Source: University of California, Berkeley, The Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 91/213 c, The Eldridge Cleaver Papers, 1963-1988, Carton 4, Folder 6. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus.]*

### DOCUMENT NO. 2

#### **Letter from Eldridge Cleaver to David Hilliard, 5 October 1969**

*[Source: Texas A&M University, Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, The Eldridge Cleaver Collection, 1959-1981. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus.]*

### DOCUMENT NO. 3

Eldridge Cleaver's Notes on Korea, 28 October 1969

*[Source: Texas A&M University, Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, The Eldridge Cleaver Collection, 1959-1981. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus.]*

### DOCUMENT NO. 4

Eldridge Cleaver Notebooks, 1970

*[Source: University of California, Berkeley, The Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 91/213 c, The Eldridge Cleaver Papers, 1963-1988, Carton 5, Folder 8. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus.]*

### DOCUMENT NO. 5

Eldridge Cleaver's Statement on Robert Scheer, 1970

*[Source: University of California, Berkeley, The Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 91/213 c, The Eldridge Cleaver Papers, 1963-1988, Carton 5, Folder 5. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus.]*

### DOCUMENT NO. 6

Welcoming Message to Eldridge Cleaver, Kathleen Cleaver, and Robert Scheer upon their Arrival in North Korea, 1970

*[Source: University of California, Berkeley, The Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 91/213 c, The Eldridge Cleaver Papers, 1963-1988, Carton 5, Folder 2. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus.]*

### DOCUMENT NO. 7

#### **Revolutionary New Year's Greetings to the 40 Million Heroic Korean People, 1970**

*[Source: University of California, Berkeley, The Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 91/213 c, The Eldridge Cleaver Papers, 1963-1988, Carton 5, Folder 3. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus.]*

**DOCUMENT NO. 8**

**Statement from the U.S. Peoples' Anti-Imperialist Delegation to Korea, 1970**

[Source: University of California, Berkeley, The Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 91/213 c, The Eldridge Cleaver Papers, 1963-1988, Carton 5, Folder 4. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus.]

**DOCUMENT NO. 9**

**Eldridge Cleaver's Introduction to Kim Il Sung's Speeches, 1971**

[Source: University of California, Berkeley, The Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 91/213 c, The Eldridge Cleaver Papers, 1963-1988, Carton 2, Folder 8. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus.]

**DOCUMENT NO. 10**

**Message to Kim Il Sung from Eldridge Cleaver, 9 October 1971**

[Source: University of California, Berkeley, The Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 91/213 c, The Eldridge Cleaver Papers, 1963-1988, Carton 5, Folder 14. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus.]

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<sup>1</sup> Despite controversy surrounding the definition of the “long 1960s,” in this introduction I will be using Arthur Marwick’s definition of the “long 1960s” as being from 1958-1974. See Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958 to c.1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>2</sup> For works that have noted the American radical left’s connection to North Korea in the late 1960s and early 1970s, see Curtis Austin, “The Black Panthers and the Vietnam War,” in *America and the Vietnam War: Re-Examining the Culture and History of a Generation*, ed. Andrew Wiest, Mary Kathryn Barbier, and Glenn Robins (New York: Routledge, 2010); Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman’s Story* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992); Eldridge Cleaver, *Target Zero: A Life in Writing*, ed. Kathleen Cleaver (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Fire* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1978); Kathleen Neal Cleaver, “Back to Africa: The Evolution of the International Section of the Black Panther Party (1969-1972),” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998); Committee on Internal Security, House of Representatives, *Gun-Barrel Politics: The Black Panther Party, 1966-1971* (Washington, D.C.: Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971); Floyd W. Hayes, III, and Francis A. Kiene, III, “‘All Power to the People’: The Political Thought of Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party,” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*; G. Louis Heath, *Off The Pigs: The History and Literature of the Black Panther Party*, (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1976); David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (Boston: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993); Timothy Leary, *Flashbacks: A Personal and Cultural History of an Era: An Autobiography* (New York: Putnam, 1990 [1983]); Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Frank J. Rafalko, *MH/CHAOS: The CIA’s Campaign Against the Radical New Left and the Black Panthers* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011); Nikhil Pal Singh, “The Black Panthers and the ‘Undeveloped Country’ of the Left,” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*; Jennifer B. Smith, *An International History of the Black Panther Party* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Fire* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1978), 121.

<sup>4</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Fire*, 122.

<sup>5</sup> There is some debate as to if this baby girl was the child of Eldridge Cleaver or Rahim Smith. “Several weeks after Cleaver’s return from North Korea [in 1969], there was a rumor that he killed Rahim Smith and buried him in some unknown location. Cleaver discovered that Smith had sexual relations with his wife Kathleen while he was visiting North Korea.” See Frank J. Rafalko, *MH/CHAOS: The CIA’s Campaign Against the Radical New Left and the Black Panthers* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 115-116.

<sup>6</sup> See Robert A. Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 865-869.

<sup>7</sup> Since “Kim Il Sung clearly lacked international credentials...Beginning in the early 1970s, therefore, the DPRK took to placing large advertisements in leading Western newspapers such as *The London Times* and *The Washington Post* featuring extended extracts from Kim Il Sung’s major speeches (though the practice soon ceased as it became clear that it was making Kim into a figure of fun).” See Adrian Buzo, *The Guerilla Dynasty: Politics and Leadership in North Korea* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 265.

<sup>8</sup> Charles K. Armstrong, “*Juche* and North Korea’s Global Aspirations,” *NKIDP Working Paper* No. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, April 2009). For Armstrong’s forthcoming book on North Korea’s internationalism, see Charles Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the Modern World, 1950-1990* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).