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# “We Need Help from Outside”: The North Korean Opposition Movement of 1956

By James F. Person

August 2006



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- #52 James Person, "'We Need Help from Outside': The North Korean Opposition Movement of 1956"
- #53 Balazs Szalontai and Sergey Radchenko, "North Korea's Efforts to Acquire Nuclear Technology and Nuclear Weapons: Evidence from Russian and Hungarian Archives"

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I. “We Need Help from Outside”: The North Korean Opposition Movement of 1956</b> by James F. Person	<b>2</b>
<b>II. Document Appendix</b>	<b>51</b>

## I. “We Need Help from Outside”: The North Korean Opposition Movement of 1956

In October 1961 Kim Il Sung recounted to a visiting Albanian colleague, Myftiu Manush, the serious political challenge he had faced five years earlier in the wake of Nikita Khrushchev’s denunciation of the “crimes” of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in February 1956:

In 1956 [...], we were facing great difficulties and were at war with these [factional] elements, and we had yet to subdue and unmask them. The sectarian elements were not alone. They had support from abroad. The Soviet comrades used them to exert pressure on us, and wanted to clarify the situation. They wanted to call a plenum to discuss this and wanted to attend too. We knew what they sought to do. They wanted to make changes in the leadership by bringing up baseless pretexts. It was our decision and we could have refused the request for a plenum meeting and their participation in it, but we looked at the issue with coolness and did not take that step. Despite the difficulties, we knew we were strong. Despite the sectarian antiparty elements, we were certain of the unity of the party CC [Central Committee]. We discussed this with the comrades and decided to gather the plenum. At that time Mikoyan also came to attend the plenum. The plenum was gathered and discussed the issues. We all spoke there and through our unity and through facts we destroyed the sectarian elements and their supporters. The sectarian elements also spoke at that meeting, but they could not achieve anything. We unmasked them and threw them out... In these conditions even the Soviet comrades could not do anything. They saw that these elements did not have support or backing. Those who came to that meeting with the intention of cutting off my head [...] were forced to leave empty-handed and the right remains with us.

We know [Albania’s] difficulties and we have supported and still support your war against revisionism. These difficulties have passed and will pass thanks to the unity of your party. As I mentioned before, we have ourselves gone through these difficulties in 1956 and later during 1958. As you know, at that time Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai, etc. [came] with bad intentions to meddle in our internal affairs. Our disagreements with them were the same as yours today. We passed [these difficulties] in silence, thanks to the unity of our party.<sup>1</sup>

As Kim Il Sung’s account suggests, the political struggle unleashed within the North Korean party by the historic Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU in February 1956 was a pivotal episode in the history of the DPRK. The direct appeals for Soviet and Chinese intervention by Kim Il Sung’s opponents internationalized the intra-party

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<sup>1</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between Kim Il Sung and Manush [Myftiu] written by Albanian Ambassador to the DPRK, Hasan Alimerko, 4 October 1961, AQPPSH, MPP Korese, V. 1961, D4, translated by Enkel Daljani.

conflict. The North Korean leader's success in overcoming the combined domestic and foreign challenge brought him an unprecedented measure of autonomy, which he employed to eliminate his political rivals and firmly establish his despotic rule in North Korea.

This paper examines the opposition movement of 1956 on the basis of previously undisclosed documents from the Russian State Archive of Recent History (RGANI), the repository of the records of the post-Stalin era Central Committee (CC CPSU). These documents, found in the files of the Department for Relations with International Communist Parties, include primarily records of conversations North Korean party leaders held with the Soviet Ambassador and other embassy officials from March 1956 to October 1956, i.e. from the period immediately preceding the Third Party Congress of the KWP to a few weeks after the September Plenum and the joint Soviet/Chinese intervention.

Despite the significance of the events of 1956, the paucity of documentary evidence has left key questions unanswered and scholarly accounts have been scant and widely divergent. Information from North Korean defectors and South Korean intelligence provided a general outline, on the basis of which most scholars, either Korean or Western, concluded that Kim Il Sung was nearly overthrown in a carefully orchestrated coup d'état.<sup>2</sup> Some even suggested that the Korean Peoples' Army (KPA) had participated in the struggle against Kim Il Sung.<sup>3</sup>

Recent accounts by historians Andrei Lankov and Balazs Szalontai, drawing on newly released documents from the Soviet and Hungarian archives, have provided a much fuller picture of these events. Both scholars describe a clandestine effort to challenge the KWP leadership hastily organized by two foreign supported "factions" after Kim Il Sung's return in late July from a month-long trip to fraternal countries. Their conclusions about the severity of the threat to Kim Il Sung differ, however. Lankov argues that Kim's opponents were driven by the same desire to de-Stalinize that inspired the Kremlin leadership, and sought from the outset to unseat Kim through a Central

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<sup>2</sup> Koon Woo Nam, *The North Korean Leadership, 1945-1965: A Study of Factionalism and Political Consolidation* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974); Robert A. Scalapino and Lee Chong-sik, *Communism in Korea: The Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); and Lim Un, *The Founding of a Dynasty in North Korea* (Tokyo: Jiyu-sha, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).



Committee vote.<sup>4</sup> Szalontai concludes, on the other hand, that the attack on Kim Il Sung's policies at the August Plenum "was a desperate attempt to turn the tide rather than a serious challenge to Kim's rule."<sup>5</sup>

This essay argues, first of all, that the opposition movement began earlier than previously described, when Kim Il Sung's detractors openly and boldly criticized him following the Third Party Congress in April 1956—a full three months before Kim's return from his extended trip to Eastern Europe. Second, the opposition group did not limit its actions to direct criticism. In a serious breach of the principle of democratic centralism, party functionaries who had returned to Korea from the Soviet Union and China appealed to foreign communist leaders to criticize Kim Il Sung during his "friendship visits" to fraternal countries in July. Third, it was only after the Great Leader failed to heed the advice of his fellow communist leaders that his critics decided to take matters into their own hands and force Kim to engage in self-criticism at the August Plenum. Kim Il Sung thus faced a threat to his political position, but his opponents contemplated removing him only as a last resort. Indeed, a number of functionaries expressed their desire to keep Kim in power. Rather than an attempted coup d'état, the challenge appears to have been an effort by the two foreign-supported groups to reverse their diminishing influence, as well as that of the Soviet and Chinese parties, in the KWP by using de-Stalinization as an instrument to purge the leadership of elements hostile to them. This course change was to be accomplished through pointed criticism and self-criticism, without removing Kim Il Sung from power as long as he complied by making the appropriate changes within the party.

This account details the charges leveled against Kim and the party leadership, which ranged from violating party democracy by appointing unqualified sycophants and lackeys to preserving Kim Il Sung's cult of personality despite the denunciation of such cults by the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956. This account also provides a nearly complete record of the proceedings of the

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<sup>4</sup> Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea 1945-1960* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002); and *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Balazs Szalontai "‘You Have No Political Line of Your Own:’ Kim Il Sung and the Soviets, 1953-1964," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 14/15 (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2004): 91.

August Plenum, along with previously undisclosed details of the ensuing Sino-Soviet joint intervention in September. The latter event arguably gave Kim Il Sung genuine cause to accuse the fraternal countries of “meddling” in internal party affairs and reason subsequently to steer a more independent course.

### **The Background: The Myth of Factional Struggle within the KWP, 1945-1955**

Factionalism is widely viewed as a distinguishing characteristic of North Korean politics during the formative years of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK). According to the standard narrative, four distinct factions competed for dominance within the leadership of the nascent North Korean party-state following Korea's liberation from Japanese rule in August 1945. The so called "Domestic Faction" headed by veteran Korean communist Pak Hon-yong, the "Soviet Faction" nominally led by Ho Ka-i (A.I. Hegai) but directed from Moscow, the Chinese-supported "Yan'an Faction" of Kim Tu-bong and Choe Chang-ik, and the "Partisan Faction" of Kim Il Sung were allegedly "all engaged in intricate maneuvering" only months after Japan's surrender.<sup>6</sup> Kim Il Sung eventually succeeded in eliminating the "intense factional rivalry" by purging the rival factions one-by-one.<sup>7</sup> By 1958, Kim had succeeded in ruthlessly forging a regime controlled by his former "Partisan" comrades-in-arms.

This view of the prominence of factionalism is given credence by the dramatic history of internecine bureaucratic factionalism in Choson dynasty Korea where, according to James Palais, "political groupings organized on the basis of personal loyalty irrespective of concrete policy issues."<sup>8</sup> Contending factions, or *p'abeol*, even distinguished themselves by making factional affiliation hereditary. Moreover, the early and short-lived Korean communist movement was beleaguered by factional rivalry. Founded in 1925, the Korean Communist Party (KCP) was dissolved by the Comintern in 1928 due to the "ceaseless, unprincipled group struggle of the Korean communists."<sup>9</sup> As Lankov contends, "factionalism," which he describes as being "indigenous"<sup>10</sup> to Korea, "has always been an important feature of Korean political life, and the Korean communist movement was plagued with it." Thus, "in light of the intense and endemic factional

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<sup>6</sup> Scalapino and Lee, *Communism in Korea: The Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972): 334.

<sup>7</sup> Andrei Lankov, "Kim Il Sung's Campaign Against the Soviet Faction in Late 1955 and the Birth of *Chuch'e*," *Korean Studies*, Volume 23, (University of Hawaii Press: 1999): 45.

<sup>8</sup> James Palais, "A Search for Korean Uniqueness," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 2. (Dec. 1995): 420.

<sup>9</sup> *Kommunistichesky internatsional pered VII vsemirnym kongressom – materially* (The Communist International before the VII World Congress – Materials) (Moscow: 1935): 447-449, cited in John N. Washburn, "Soviet Russia and the Korean Communist Party," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 23, No. 1. (Mar., 1950): 59-65.

<sup>10</sup> Andrei Lankov, "[Another Korea] (163) The Accidental Leader," *The Korea Times*, 26 July 2005.

rivalry and the Korean tradition of political factionalism, it was inevitable that [Kim Il Sung] should see all other factions as sources of potential danger.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet labeling North Korean politics as “factionalist” may be, as Yang Sung-chul notes, a “simplification,” if not an “outright misnomer.”<sup>12</sup> While the leadership of the North Korean party-state was comprised of cadres with diverse revolutionary backgrounds, the strong factional solidarity based on group loyalty, or *p’abeol*, that plagued both Choson Korea and the early Korean communist movement was all but absent from post-liberation North Korean politics. The only exception may have been the “Domestic” group, which, forged over a two decade-long association and contemptuous of many of the foreign revolutionaries, attempted to prevent the total eclipse of its influence following the merger of the Northern and Southern branches of the KWP in 1949. Once representing the mainstream of the Korean communist movement, Veteran Korean communists such as Pak Hon-yong were relegated to subordinate positions in the unified party. Pak and other Korean communist leaders originally from the South thus perceived a threat and acted accordingly by purportedly attempting unseat Kim Il Sung in a *coup d’etat* in 1953.<sup>13</sup> Pak Hon-yong and most “Domestic” group members were purged the same year. Pak, founder of the KCP and once recognized as the head of the Korean communist movement was tried and executed in mid 1956, despite the Soviet ambassador’s attempt to dissuade Kim from carrying out the sentence.<sup>14</sup>

The existing documentary evidence does not lend support to the notion that factionalism, supposedly an endemic feature in Korean political culture, characterized all groups that comprised the North Korean leadership.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, there is little to suggest

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<sup>11</sup> Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005): 19.

<sup>12</sup> Yang Sung-chul, *The North and South Korean Political Systems: A Comparative Analysis* (Seoul: Seoul Press, 1994): 326.

<sup>13</sup> The portions of the lengthy memo composed by V.V. Kovyshenko and cited by Lankov as proof of factionalism in the leadership of the still nascent North Korean party-state mention only the rivalry between Kim Il Sung and Pak Hon-yong. The fragments cited do appear to prove factional activities of the “Domestic” group, though this came as a result of the Kim-Pak rivalry and threat to the status of other veteran Korean communists.

<sup>14</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Kim Il Sung, 19 April 1956, AVPRF, Opis 12, Papka 68, Delo 5, Listy 64-65.

<sup>15</sup> Andrei Lankov has suggested that the leaders of the Yan’an faction, especially Choe Chang-ik, “used every opportunity to set Kim against the Soviet-Koreans. In turn, the Soviet-Koreans attempted to prove to Kim that the Yanan members were incapable or untrustworthy.” As evidence, Lankov cites a 12 March 1956 conversation between Soviet-Korean Pak Chang-ok and counselor of the Soviet embassy, S.N.

any inherent hostility or antagonism, not to mention the existence of “intense factional rivalry,” among the Soviet-Koreans and the returnees from China. Instead, the divisive actions of individuals from these groups or personal-rivalries between functionaries have been misinterpreted as evidence of factional strife. Likewise, measures taken against individuals or small groups of functionaries from one group have been presented as proof of broad-based factional rivalry, such as the purging of Chinese returnees (Kim) Mu Chong and Pak Il-u, and Soviet-Korean Ho Ka-i. However, as will be discussed below, in the case of these foreign revolutionaries Kim Il Sung clearly demonstrated that the attacks were limited to individual targets.

This is not to deny the existence of mutual suspicion among the remnants of the the Manchurian guerrilla movement, the veterans of the Chinese civil war, and the Soviet-Koreans that the Soviet occupiers fashioned into a political and administrative elite. To be sure, there were individuals such as Pak Il-u who harbored certain animosities toward those with differing revolutionary backgrounds and sought to form personal cliques. Pak Il-u was reported to have even claimed that “people from the Soviet Union have different manners and customs than those who are from China.” Kim Il Sung berated him for this statement at the KWP CC plenum on 4 April 1955, criticizing Pak for engaging in individual factional activities by “stealth[ily] schem[ing] to gather around him comrades whose level of class consciousness is low.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Kim declared “[i]n our country there were conditions for the birth of factional elements. But today, there are no factional groups in our Party, only a few individuals who are engaged in factional activities.”<sup>17</sup> The language Kim used in castigating these individual factionalists in 1955, and especially the members of the 1956 opposition group after they were purged marked a shift in terminology that is particularly revealing. Denying the existence of *p’abeol*, a term used to describe the factions prominent during the Choson

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Filatov during which Pak allegedly “spoke out against the Yanan faction, actively criticizing their actions.” Yet, as readers will find, in the document [DOCUMENT No. 1], Pak Chang-ok spoke about the actions of individuals, including Choe Chang-ik from the Yan’an group, though his comments were far from “active criticis[m].” In fact, Pak complained about being mistreated by individuals from all of the alleged factions, including by Soviet-Korean Pak Chong-ae. See; Lankov, “Kim Il Sung’s Campaign against the Soviet Faction in Late 1955 and the Birth of *Chuch’e*,” *Korean Studies*, Volume 23, (University of Hawaii Press: 1999): 46.

<sup>16</sup> Kim Il Sung, “On Some Questions Concerning Party and State Work in the Present Stage of the Socialist Revolution,” *Selected Works: Volume 1* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1965): 298.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 295.

dynasty and in the early Korean communist movement that verifiably centered on group loyalty, locality, and even heritage, Kim used the term *jeongp'a*, a more slanderous expression usually reserved for religious sectarianism. Indicating the degree to which Marxism-Leninism had become a surrogate for religion, the term suggests deviation from orthodoxy. It is often translated in North Korean publications as ‘dogmatist’ or ‘splittist.’ As Kim’s memoirs reveal, this is precisely how he perceived his critics in 1956:

Backed up by the outside great-power chauvinistic forces, the anti-Party, counterrevolutionary factionalists and inveterate dogmatists [*jeong'pa*][...] who had long been engaged in factional intrigues, now on the basis of revisionism made a bid for a comeback, and started machinations as if their time had come.

In line with the maneuverings of the modern revisionists who wanted to have the revisionist line adopted as the “common program” of the international communist movement, these people tried hard to spread the move[ment], describing revisionism as an “international tendency.” But the purpose of these people, who formed an alliance with modern revisionism, was to overthrow the Party and its leadership and to all intents and purposes frustrate the Korean revolution.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, the monumental task of constructing a communist state in the northern half of the Korean peninsula seems to have muted somewhat any acrimony among the groups, including the “Domestic” group, in the early years, as did the preservation of separate structures for the northern and southern parties until the two were merged in June 1949.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, there was a surprising degree of cooperation among members of the alleged factions both before and after the war. Soviet-Koreans and returnees from China readily allied in their criticism of post-war rehabilitation policies and again in the wake of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU, when Kim resisted the new line adopted by the international communist movement. Moreover, a number of leading functionaries from these groups had revolutionary careers that spanned Korea, China, and the Soviet Union. One such cadre was Yi Pil-gyu, head of the department of construction materials under the Cabinet of Ministers and member of the alleged “Yan’an faction”

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<sup>18</sup> Baik Bong, *Kim Il Sung Biography II: From Building Democratic Korea to Chullima Flight* (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1970): 550.

<sup>19</sup> Adrian Buzo, *The Guerrilla Dynasty: Politics and Leadership in North Korea* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999): 20.

who had spent time in both China and Korea during the colonial period before going to Moscow for two years to attend the CPSU Higher Party School. [DOCUMENT No. 2]

The factional solidarity of the Soviet-Korean and “Yan’an” groups is likewise questionable. Despite conducting their revolutionary careers in the same countries and even speaking the same languages, it is highly unlikely that the members of the Soviet and Chinese “factions” could have coalesced within weeks or even months of arriving in post-liberation Korea. The Soviet-Koreans came from diverse locations in the Soviet Union and from occupations ranging from teacher to lower-level party functionary. The same was true for Koreans returning from China, as some began their revolutionary careers in Shanghai before moving to the remote Shanxi province with the Chinese communists, while others served in the Chinese 8<sup>th</sup> and New 4<sup>th</sup> Armies.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, there were well-known internal conflicts in the groups. Ho Ka-i and Pak Chang-ok, perhaps the two most influential Soviet-Koreans, allegedly disliked each other so intensely that upon learning of Ho’s suicide, Pak expressed little remorse.

Those who arrived from the Soviet Union and China did have shared experiences, however, and a sense of cultural affinity that fostered the creation of loose social groups. Indeed, the Soviet-Koreans and returnees from China, often seen as outsiders by local Korean leaders and citizens alike, were criticized for socializing among themselves,<sup>21</sup> and, in the case of the Soviet-Koreans, for displaying an “arrogant air of cultural superiority.”<sup>22</sup> This was frequently expressed through chauvinism in dealings with local cadres and a propensity to import mechanically the experiences of the more successful Soviet and Chinese parties. Such attitudes, particularly in matters of ideology, raised the ire of local cadres.

Yet the “Soviet” and “Yan’an” groups were labeled “factions” only after the 1956 opposition movement – which, ironically enough, paired leading functionaries from the Soviet Union and China – sought to challenge Kim Il Sung and the KWP leadership on

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<sup>20</sup> Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 79.

<sup>21</sup> Lee Chong-sik, email to author, 20 July 2006 and Memorandum of Conversation with Vice Premier of the Cabinet of Ministers of the DPRK and Member of the Presidium, KWP CC, Pak Chang-ok, 12 March 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 74-85.

<sup>22</sup> Glenn D. Paige and Dong Jun Lee, “The Post-War Politics of Communist Korea,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 14, (Apr. – Jun., 1963), p. 23.

matters of orthodoxy. In the wake of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the CPSU in February of that year, the Great Leader had hastened his transition from internationalist, fraternal socialism to his indigenized version of Marxism-Leninism, or “Korean-style socialism”<sup>23</sup> and the anti-hegemonistic *Juche* ideology. Early indications of Kim’s intention to label these groups as “factions” in order to divide and conquer were evident in late 1955, during an attack on Soviet-Korean cadres. Deputy Premier Pak Ui-wan, a Soviet-Korean, first claimed that the revolutionary experiences of the various groups were being “separately defined,” and that this only served to weaken, not strengthen the party.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, following the August 1956 KWP CC Plenum, when the members of the opposition group were purged, the North Korean ambassador to the Soviet Union, Yi Sang-jo indicated in a letter addressed to the KWP CC that “Com. Kim Il Sung and his supporters took revenge on the comrades who spoke [at the August plenum], declaring them ‘the anti-Party Yan’an group’ and ‘conspirators’ trying to overthrow the Party and the Government.” According to Yi, “the so-called Yan’an group, which opposed the cult of personality and which in fact did not exist in nature, was fabricated. As a result, intra-Party democracy and Party unity were undermined even more.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, despite the fact that the members of the opposition group boldly and openly criticized Kim, and “he assured [them] that he accepts these comradely comments[...] somewhere behind the backs of these comrades, fictitious “cases” were created about their factional activity, calling them the Yan’an ‘group.’”<sup>26</sup>

In labeling the groups “factions,” scholars have failed to differentiate between actions of and toward individuals and broad-based movements. Moreover, scholars have not sufficiently distinguished genuine policy debate in North Korea from the factional conflicts that plagued Choson dynasty Korea and the early Korean communist movement. Yet, contrary to the totalitarian system that subsequently took shape in North Korea, internal debate was permitted for nearly a decade after the founding of the DPRK. The

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Armstrong, “A Socialism of Our Style’: North Korean Ideology in a Post-Communist Era,” *North Korean Foreign Relations In the Post-Cold War Era* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1998): 33.

<sup>24</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Deputy Premier Comrade Pak Ui-wan, 24 January 1956. RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 67-69.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Yi Sang-jo to the Central Committee of the Korean Workers Party, 5 October 1956 RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 233-295.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



open border between North and South Korea before and during the Korean War served to limit the intensity of such criticism, since those who disagreed could simply cross the border to South Korea. This “safety valve” removed hostile elements from the “North Korean body politic” before they could threaten the stability of the regime with overt criticism.<sup>27</sup> While Kim Il Sung did not entirely welcome such discussion, he tolerated it through the early post-war years while making the transition from internationalist, fraternal socialism, including the principle of “democratic centralism,” to “Korean style socialism.” During this transition period, the Leninist principle of “democratic centralism” still allowed for debate and discussion until a policy had been approved by the party. Adopted by virtually every socialist country as the primary decision-making and organizational principle, democratic centralism required that “all party organizations should unconditionally support and carry out the party line and policies, and the lower party organizations must execute dutifully the decisions of the higher party organizations.”<sup>28</sup> That is, once a matter was decided, maintaining iron discipline and party unanimity was paramount.

Until Kim defiantly rejected the new line that emerged in Moscow after Stalin’s death, there had been a balance between democracy and centralization in the DPRK. With the exception of the actions of the purged “Domestic” group of Pak Hon-yong, the iron rule of the party remained almost unbroken, and there were no broad-based breaches of democratic centralism warranting the charge of factionalism against any of the groups until Kim Il Sung began to resist the importation of the experiences of foreign fraternal parties in late 1953. During the war Kim did purge a number of high profile Soviet-Koreans and returnees from China, but these were attacks on individuals. In particular, in a disagreement over the future composition of the Korean Workers’ Party, Kim struggled with Ho Ka-I, who sought to turn the KWP into a Leninist vanguard party as opposed to the mass movement party Kim envisioned. As Suh Dae-sook notes, however, “Kim ensured that [Ho’s] expulsion did not signal the purge of other Soviet-Koreans,” and no proof has emerged that Ho had the support of other Soviet-Koreans in his desire to recast

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Armstrong, “The Nature, Origins, and Development of the North Korean State,” Samuel S. Kim ed. *The North Korean System in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2001): 52.

<sup>28</sup> Charter of the KWP, Chapter II, Article 11, cited in Sung Chul Yang, *The North and South Korean Political Systems: A Comparative Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994): 231.

the KWP. “Ho’s encounter with Kim was not an organized confrontation of the Soviet-Koreans with Kim or his partisans. It was in essence Ho’s implementation of the policy he considered best for building a strong communist party in Korea that ran counter to Kim’s policy, and other members of the Soviet-Korean group understood it to be that and nothing more.”<sup>29</sup> After a series of unsuccessful military campaigns, Kim purged a number of returnees from China serving in commanding positions of the Korean Peoples’ Army (KPA). These actions also did not constitute a purge of the “Yan’an” Koreans, but were instead attacks on individuals.

A month after the armistice, at the August 1953 Plenum of the KWP CC, Kim Il Sung announced his plan for postwar reconstruction: a Three Year Plan for 1954-1956 that called for “priority development of heavy industry with the simultaneous development of light industry and agriculture.” In practice, however, light industry and agriculture received little funding, with some three-fourths of capital investment going to heavy industry.<sup>30</sup> The combination of adverse weather conditions and inadequate investment resulted in a poor harvest and subsequent food crisis in the countryside,<sup>31</sup> prompting open criticism of Kim’s economic policies by a number of high ranking party officials, among whom were Soviet-Koreans and returnees from China. Soviet-Koreans such as Pak Chang-ok and Pak Yong-bin, who had only recently been promoted as a result of the vacancies left by the purged “Domestic” group, had been inspired by Georgy Malenkov’s campaign to reorient the Soviet economy. In a breach of democratic centralism, they opposed what they considered a grievous disregard for the basic needs of the very workers who were expected to restore heavy industry.<sup>32</sup>

The Soviet-Korean critics were joined by returnees from China, Choe Chang-ik and Yun Kong-hum, who made unfavorable comparisons between North Korean policies and those of the Soviet Union and China. As the scholar Masao Okonogi observes, for Kim Il Sung, the criticism regarding consumer goods made by Soviet-Koreans and returnees from China was not simply a domestic debate within the party, but “included

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p.127.

<sup>30</sup> Koon Woo Nam, *The North Korean Leadership: A Study of Factionalism and Political Consolidation* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1974): 101.

<sup>31</sup> Balazs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism 1953-1964* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Stanford University Press, 2006): 64.

<sup>32</sup> Dae-sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung*, p. 141.

the sensitive issue of the legitimacy of North Korean economic policy in relation to that of Moscow.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, for Kim Il Sung, the issue was Soviet hegemony versus national economic self-determination.

This episode demonstrated to Kim the propensity of Soviet-Koreans and returnees from China to try to replicate developments in the Soviet and Chinese parties, and their willingness to violate the principle of democratic centralism to ensure that these foreign experiences be imitated. As Lee Chong-sik observes, “given the history of Korean communism [...] it is quite understandable that Korean communists should mechanically introduce abstract tenets of Marxism and Leninism as well as the experience of the more successful parties abroad. The Korean communists had generally lacked the sophistication, experience, and confidence to relate the abstract theories and foreign experiences to the realities of Korea”<sup>34</sup> Until Stalin’s death, the influence of the CPSU had been “too great for the Korean communists to strike out on their own.”

The April 1955 CC Plenum served as an occasion for Kim Il Sung to put an end to the debate over post-war economic recovery policy and confirm his position as undisputed leader of the party and state. He stated that he had given his critics “a powerful key to promote [...] independence and socialist construction by overcoming the old ideological remnants that hinder the forward march of the Korean people on the road to socialism” and, in light of recent violations of the iron will of the party, sternly warned his critics to “refrain from factional struggle.”<sup>35</sup> Kim attacked those who had conducted their revolutionary activities abroad (i.e. Soviet-Koreans and returnees from China), warning against attempting to “emulate or imitate others.” He urged all party members, regardless of their revolutionary past, to become “disciplined fighters of the Korean revolution,” asserting that the partisan struggles (i.e. Kim’s own guerrilla activities) constituted the mainstream of the Korean communist revolution. Thus, Kim began the transition from fraternal socialism to a more indigenized form of Marxism-Leninism that was intended to better relate to the realities of Korea. Simultaneously, Kim positioned

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<sup>33</sup> Masao Okonogi, “North Korean Communism: In Search of Its Prototype,” in Suh Dae-Sook, *Korean Studies: New Pacific Currents* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994):187.

<sup>34</sup> Lee Chong-sik, *The Korean Workers’ Party*, p. 95.

<sup>35</sup> *Nodong shinmun*, 9 April 1955, cited in Masao Okonogi, “North Korean Communism,” p. 188.

himself as the revolution's "chief propagator and defender."<sup>36</sup> Those who had previously dared to challenge Kim's post-war economic recovery policies using Malenkov's consumer goods line found their positions threatened. From mid-1955, such critics as Pak Chang-ok, Pak Yong-bin, and Choe Chang-ik increasingly came under attack.

However, as Szalontai observes, Kim could not completely ignore the reality of the rural food crisis and thus of many of the claims of his critics. Indeed, during the April 1955 plenum the leadership not only admitted "that the overwhelming majority of the population was dissatisfied with the economic situation," but "resolved to increase investments in the rural sector and scaled down the agricultural targets for 1955."<sup>37</sup>

### **The December 1955 Central Committee Plenum: Soviet-Koreans under Attack**

Having been forced to make economic concessions at the April Plenum as a result of political pressure and unfavorable economic conditions, Kim feared calls for political liberalization from cadres inspired by the new course adopted by the post-Stalin leadership in Moscow just as he was attempting to distance his regime from fraternal-socialism. Since the Soviet-Koreans were naturally the "main potential trouble-makers" in this respect,<sup>38</sup> Kim turned his attention to limiting their influence. The North Korean leader clearly was guilty of many of the offenses for which Soviet officials were increasingly criticizing Stalin, and the recent economic debate demonstrated how quickly foreign-supported groups would use Kremlin policies to challenge anything that appeared Stalin-inspired. On the other hand, the relaxation of Soviet control over client states that followed Stalin's death suggested to Kim that actions against the Soviet-Koreans would not prompt retaliation from Moscow. Besides, the Kremlin's new course troubled the Chinese as well, who were not altogether comfortable with Soviet calls for peaceful coexistence with the West.

The campaign against Soviet-Koreans would serve two purposes. It would test the waters to determine if Kim Il Sung could at long last proceed to eliminate foreign influences from the KWP leadership while he was attempting to redefine Marxism-Leninism for Korea's unique conditions, and it would demonstrate the cost of criticizing

<sup>36</sup> Dae-sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung*, p. 142.

<sup>37</sup> Balazs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, p. 68.

<sup>38</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, p. 156.

him on post-war economic recovery policies. Recognizing that there was little he could do to prevent Soviet-Koreans from maintaining frequent contact with Moscow's embassy so long as they maintained their Soviet citizenship, Kim Il Sung insisted that all DPRK officials who came from the USSR had either to select Korean citizenship or relinquish their positions. On 29 November 1955 the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR sided with Kim on the matter after protracted negotiations with Pyongyang, and declared that Soviet-Koreans working in the DPRK should either take Korean citizenship or return to the USSR.<sup>39</sup>

In early December 1955 Kim's hagiographer, author Han Sol-ya, conjured up alleged anti-Party activities by several Soviet-Koreans—particularly their supposed favoritism toward South Korean authors with questionable ideological credentials over home-grown North Korean proletarian authors. During a meeting with Soviet Counselor S.N. Filatov on 22 December, Foreign Minister Nam Il, himself a Soviet-Korean, explained the essence of this charge:

Soviet-Koreans working on the ideological front – Ki Sok-pok and Chong Yul – having received from the CC an order that after liberation it is necessary to support authors from the South, yet, without even attempting to sort out their position in Korean literature, began to celebrate reactionary authors from the South and criticized local [northern] proletarian authors. After these authors were exposed as spies, they did not admit their mistakes and even threatened local authors who raised the matter, accusing them of being anti-Soviet.<sup>40</sup>

Kim also criticized a number of higher-profile Soviet-Koreans, including Chairman of the State Planning Commission Pak Chang-ok who had also served as head of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda, for supporting reactionary authors from South Korea. Such contrived charges were the opening salvo of a broader assault on the Soviet-Koreans, culminating in Kim Il Sung's attacks during the December Plenum.

At an enlarged presidium meeting on 28 December, Kim unleashed his personal attack on the Soviet-Koreans. In a speech famous for the proclamation of *Juch'e* ideology, Kim accused Soviet-Koreans of being dogmatic and fundamentalist in their

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<sup>39</sup> Memorandum of conversation with North Korean Foreign Minister Nam Il, 6 December 1955, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 4-5.

<sup>40</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Foreign Minister Comrade Nam Il, 22 December 1955. RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, List 96.

emulation of the Soviet Union, adhering to Moscow's line rather than that of the KWP.

“When we study the history of the Chinese revolution, or the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism,” Kim claimed, “it is entirely for the purpose of correctly carrying out our own revolution.”

To make revolution in Korea we must know Korean history and geography as well as the customs of the Korean people. Only then is it possible to educate our people in a way that suits them and to inspire in them an ardent love for their native place and their native motherland.<sup>41</sup>

“Yet,” according to Kim, “many of our functionaries are ignorant of our country's history and so do not strive to discover, inherit and carry forward its fine traditions.” As a result, many of these functionaries, especially those from the Soviet Union, committed egregious errors in ideological work. “The mistakes of Pak Chang-ok and his kind,” he said, “may be attributed to their negation of the history of the Korean literary movement. They closed their eyes to the fine writers of the KAPF – Korean (Coreen) Artiste Proletarienne Federation – and to the splendid works of progressive scholars and writers” including Pak Yon-am, Chong Ta-san.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, Kim lamented the absence of inspiring Korean images in schools and People's Army rest homes, where images of Russian poet Alexander Pushkin and the Siberian steppe adorned the walls instead.<sup>43</sup> Kim's discussion of the failure to appreciate the peculiarities of Korean history and culture led to a rather interesting monologue on the creative application of Marxism-Leninism. “Marxism-Leninism,” he claimed, “is not a dogma, it is a guide to action....” Marxism-Leninism “can display its indestructible vitality only when it is applied creatively to suit the conditions of each country.”

The same applies to the experience of the fraternal parties. It will prove valuable to us only when we study it, grasp its essence and properly apply it to our realities. But if we just gulp it down and spoil our work, it will not only harm our work but also lead to discrediting the valuable experience of the fraternal parties.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Kim Il Sung, “On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Juche in ideological Work,” *On Juche in our Revolution I* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1975): 150-151.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153-154.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

Finally, Kim declared his partisan activities to have been the vanguard of the Korean communist revolution and stated that these national traditions, not those of other communist states, should be celebrated. According to Pak Chang-ok, Kim also accused fifteen Soviet-Koreans of being accomplices of Ho Ka-i in factional activities before his alleged suicide in 1953. All fifteen were asked to explain their relationship with A.I. Hegai.<sup>45</sup> Kim's speech was distributed to all "primary organizations of the city of Pyongyang and provincial committees and read at Party meetings. Once again, everyone discussed the Soviet-Koreans." **[DOCUMENT No. 1]**

A broader attack on the Soviet-Koreans followed in the form of a party decree on 18 January 1956 entitled "About the Future Struggle against Reactionary Bourgeois Ideology in Literature and Art." The decree leveled specific accusations against individual Soviet-Koreans such as Pak Chang-ok and Pak Yong-bin, many of whom were ordered to make humiliating self-criticism and forced to resign from their posts.

Soviet embassy reports from this period are filled with records of meetings with affected Soviet-Koreans. Pak Chang-ok commented to Counselor Filatov that using literature to subdue the Soviet-Koreans seemed ludicrous, since few of the accused had anything to do with propaganda work. **[DOCUMENT No. 1]** Others, such as Deputy Premier of the Council of Ministers Pak Ui-wan, spoke candidly to Soviet officials about the unfair treatment of Soviet-Koreans. During a meeting with Filatov on 24 January, Pak Ui-wan characterized Kim Il Sung's December 28 speech as "an attack directed against the group of authorities who came from the Soviet Union." Nonetheless, Pak had not expected that the Party would issue the decree "About the Future Struggle Against Reactionary Bourgeois Ideology in Literature and Art," since, on the basis of that document, "one could say that comrades Pak Chang-ok, Pak Yong-bin, Ki Sok-pok and others are accused of factionary, anti-Party activities; of systematically dissenting from Party policies." While admitting that Pak Chang-ok and others could rightly be accused of committing errors in their earlier work, Pak claimed that "they never carried out factionary and anti-Party activities and never dissented from Party policies."

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<sup>45</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Deputy Premier Comrade Pak Ui-wan, 24 January 1956. RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 67-69.

Pak reported to Filatov that the Pyongyang city committee had begun to carry out a campaign against all Soviet-Koreans using Kim Il Sung's December 28 speech as their inspiration. Pak emphasized that these actions did not serve to strengthen the Party. On the contrary, "more than ever before, the Soviet-Koreans, Chinese-Koreans, and domestic Koreans, etc., are being separately defined. Dividing into groups [...] does not strengthen the Party, but weakens it. And this all began with the speech of Kim Il Sung at the December Plenum of the CC KWP."<sup>46</sup>

Sensing perhaps that he was not in a position entirely to eliminate the influence of the Soviet-Koreans, and having already achieved his preliminary objectives, throughout the spring of 1956 Kim Il Sung took measures partially to rehabilitate the accused Soviet-Koreans, again following Stalin's methods. During a mid-January meeting of the Political Council, Kim reportedly criticized those who were "dizzy with success"—to use Stalin's term—raising the issue of "the incorrect behavior of individual officials in relation to Soviet-Koreans." Kim suggested they arrange "a meeting with Soviet-Koreans and calm them" and then "hold a meeting with members of the Central Committee and clarify for them the incorrect behavior of individual officials in relation to the Soviet-Koreans." On 20 February Kim Il Sung delivered a speech to the Council of Ministers in which he "stressed that ministers poorly utilize[d] Soviet specialists."

The Soviet Union, at our request, sent qualified workers with a wealth of experience in organizing industries, transport systems, and agriculture. We ascertained that a number of ministers receive recommendations from these advisers on various questions regarding improving the work of industries, admit the correctness of the advice, thank the advisers for giving them counsel and then do absolutely nothing to carry out these recommendations [...]

Kim Il Sung continued with a lengthy discussion of the "incorrect behavior of a number of officials in relation to Koreans who came from the Soviet Union."

We all know that the Koreans who came from the Soviet Union played a great role in our revolution. At the time of greatest need for our people, they selflessly worked in leadership roles, teaching many of us new socialist methods of work. A few comrades did make mistakes in their

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



work, they were criticized, some of them punished, and now our task is to help them turn over a new leaf and become useful to our Party.<sup>47</sup>

Kim Il Sung personally met with Kim Sung-bok, Kim Jae-wook, and others to discuss the literary crisis. He “stressed that Ki Sok-pok, Jang Dong-hyok, Chong Yul and other officials coming from the Soviet Union are fine workers and we made far too many complaints against them. We should individually inform them of their mistakes in relation to literature and art and we should not have accused Pak Chang-ok and Pak Yong-bin of such crimes as they were accused.”<sup>48</sup>

As Lankov suggests, the objectives of the campaign against the Soviet-Koreans were limited from the start. “A lesson had been learned: the most prominent Soviet-Korean leaders had been warned off, the lower cadres had again been made to realize that Kim Il Sung was the supreme authority within the Party, and that no foreign protection could save anyone from the Great Leader’s wrath.”<sup>49</sup> By provoking attacks against Soviet-Koreans regarding literature and then criticizing them in a speech at the 1955 December Plenum, Kim demoralized many of them, only to partially rehabilitate the group in early 1956. Presumably, his magnanimity would endear him to the Soviet-Koreans who, grateful to him, would never again consider questioning his policies or challenging his authority.

### **The Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU**

In late January 1956 Kim Il Sung fatefully decided not to attend the CPSU Twentieth Party Congress to be held in Moscow February 14-25.<sup>50</sup> As Political Council member Pak Chong-ae recorded, “despite all of her attempts to convince Com. Kim Il Sung to attend the Twentieth Party Congress himself, he could not be moved,” reasoning that he would “visit the GDR in the summer of that year and that being out of the country

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<sup>47</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Deputy Premier Comrade Pak Ui-wan, 21 February 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 70-74.

<sup>48</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Deputy Premier Comrade Pak Ui-wan, 29 February 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 84-85.

<sup>49</sup> Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005): 53.

<sup>50</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Deputy Premier Comrade Pak Ui-wan, 24 January 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 67-69.

two times in one year is not possible.”<sup>51</sup> The Political Council thus decided to send Kim’s former partisan ally Choe Yong-gon to Moscow instead.<sup>52</sup>

Besides Khrushchev’s blistering attack on Stalin in the famed “secret speech,” the delegates to the Twentieth Party Congress heard a number of speeches criticizing the cult of personality and supporting collective leadership and peaceful coexistence. Soviet embassy documents reveal that Kim Il Sung received regular reports from Moscow throughout the congress. On 18 February he opened a meeting of deputy premiers and members of the CC KWP with an attempt at damage control:

Recently, in both oral and written propaganda, the question of the role of the individual in the development of the history of mankind has been improperly handled. He [Kim] indicated that in all newspapers and journals his thoughts are referred to far too often, and things that he didn’t even do are attributed to him. This contradicts the theory of Marxism-Leninism, which guides our Party in its development. It leads to the improper training of members of the Party. Kim Il Sung demanded that members of the CC KWP carry out necessary measures on this matter and strive for a correct discussion of the question of the individual among the masses in the development of society.<sup>53</sup>

According to Pak Ui-wan, a few days later, after receiving another report from Moscow, Kim “very carefully and thoroughly [...] asked about the speech of N.S. Khrushchev with regards to the cult of personality, about collective leadership, about shortcomings in organizational-Party and ideological work. He asked for a description of Com. A.I. Mikoyan’s and Com. Molotov’s speeches. He expressed regret that he himself did not go to the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU.”<sup>54</sup>

Three days after the congress adjourned, Choe Yong-gon met with Soviet Foreign Minister V.M. Molotov on 28 February to discuss the proceedings.

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Choe Yong-gon was a former comrade in arms of Kim Il Sung during his guerrilla days in Manchuria. After failing to convince the chairman of the Democratic Party, Cho Man-sik, to agree to the planned trusteeship over Korea decided upon at the Moscow meeting of Allied Foreign Ministers in December 1945, Cho Man-sik, arguably the most respected political leader in Korea at the time, was forcibly removed as head of the Party and replaced by Choe Yong-gon. Choe Yong-gon was likely a secret member of the Korean Communist Party and later of the KWP, while serving as chairman of the Democratic Party. In 1956 Choe was named to the Central Committee of the KWP, though he was officially still the chairman of the Democratic Party and was technically not a member of the KWP.

<sup>53</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Deputy Premier Comrade Pak Ui-wan, 21 February 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 70-74.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

After exchanging greetings, Choe Yong-gon shared his impressions of the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU. He said that the Twentieth Party Congress made a great impression not just on the Korean delegation, but on all delegations. The congress, said Choe, will play a tremendous role in the reconstructive work of fraternal parties, including the Korean Workers' Party. The experience of the CPSU in this regard will be very useful. The shortcomings that were mentioned during the congress, he said, are entirely applicable to the work of the Korean Workers' Party.

*Molotov* agreed that the experience of the CPSU will be helpful also to fraternal parties.

*Choe Yong-gon* said that all directives given for the CPSU at the Twentieth Party Congress will be seen as guiding principles that should also serve as a basis for work for the Korean Workers' Party [...].<sup>55</sup>

Despite the enthusiasm for the Twentieth Party Congress Choe voiced in his conversation with V.M. Molotov, as an ally of Kim Il Sung he must have recognized the danger to Kim from the attacks on his Soviet mentor. He therefore likely refrained from completely disclosing the contents of the secret speech to the Korean party at large during a report he delivered on 20 March. Even after Molotov sent "Several Questions Connected with the Study of the Speech of Comrade N.S. Khrushchev at the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU" to the Korean party in mid-March, the Soviet embassy reported that from all indications, the KWP leadership had learned very little. On 18 April Soviet Ambassador V.I. Ivanov reported that judging from a letter the KWP leadership circulated, the Koreans did not grasp the true significance of Khrushchev's speech.<sup>56</sup> The letter stated that the cult of personality was a phenomenon unique to the CPSU and was alien to the KWP. It also cited examples of collective leadership from the history of the CPSU and the Korean Communist Party, denying that the CC KWP had ever veered from the path of Marxism-Leninism.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, it claimed that the cult of personality existed only in connection with the purged leader of the "Domestic faction," Pak Hon-yong. Reflecting Kim's continued uneasiness over the power of

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<sup>55</sup> Reception of the Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of the DPRK Choe Yong-gon, 28 February 1956 at 17:00, Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (AVPRF), Fond 6, Opis 15a, Por.142, Papka 30, List 1.

<sup>56</sup> Diary of Soviet Ambassador to the DPRK, Comrade V.I. Ivanov, 18 April 1956. RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 137-139.

<sup>57</sup> Several Questions in Connection with the Study of the Speech of Comrade Khrushchev at the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 137-162.

Soviet influence in Korea, the letter reiterated his earlier warning against dogmatism, formalism and using foreign examples of communism, in particular, using foreign textbooks, pictures, etc., when there was an abundance of “national examples.”<sup>58</sup>

Kim Il Sung’s response to Khrushchev’s attack on Stalin also included sending party members to the Soviet embassy to draw distinctions between Stalin and Pyongyang’s own little Stalin. In one such meeting, an individual named Yi Sung-woon claimed that “Kim Il Sung [...] is not a dictator, he genuinely respects the Korean people, he possesses the traits of humanism; dissidents, traitors, Syngman Rhee collaborators, our government gives them freedom and creates for them the conditions for a normal life. The square named after Kim Il Sung in Pyongyang bears his name not at his own initiative.” Ambassador Ivanov noted skeptically that “Yi Sung-woon himself could not even explain how that came about, and further stated that they do not have a cult of personality.”<sup>59</sup>

Kim Il Sung was also threatened by Khrushchev’s call for peaceful coexistence with the West, as was Mao Zedong, since such a policy implied accepting the division of their countries. On the other hand, as it did for Mao, de-Stalinization provided Kim an opportunity to move decisively against his rivals. This opportunity was enhanced by an unforeseen result of the de-Stalinization campaign—the steady deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations, which gave the North Korean leadership room to follow a more independent line.

### **The KWP Third Party Congress**

Two months after the CPSU Twentieth Party Congress, the KWP held its Third Party Congress, the first such meeting in eight years and the first since the union with the South Korean Workers’ Party. Emissaries from across the communist world converged on Pyongyang to deliver congratulatory speeches at the largely ceremonial event held April 23-29. Among the distinguished guests was CPSU representative Leonid I. Brezhnev, the future general secretary, who spoke of the momentous events that had

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Diary of Soviet Ambassador to the DPRK, Comrade V.I. Ivanov, 13 April 1956. RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, List 120.

occurred at the CPSU Congress in February, using the occasion to “urge his North Korean hosts to import Soviet consumer goods instead of machines.”<sup>60</sup>

Kim Il Sung delivered the first of three official reports on behalf of the Central Committee announcing that the first Five-Year Plan would be launched in 1957. With reconstruction efforts and nationalization of industry nearly complete after the Three Year Plan, some 80 percent of capital investment in industry was to be allocated to expanding the foundation for heavy industry.<sup>61</sup> Collectivization of agriculture, which began in November 1954, was to be completed within the shortest possible time. Kim’s report was laced with the customary anti-American vitriol and equally vociferous attacks on “anti-party elements,” i.e. the purged members of the “Domestic” group. Conspicuously absent, however, were references to de-Stalinization and collective leadership. Instead, Kim Il Sung continued to describe the personality cult in the DPRK as having been cultivated by Pak Hon-yong.

Additional reports were delivered by Chairman of the Central Auditing Committee Yi Chu-yon, who discussed Party finances and membership,<sup>62</sup> and Pak Chong-ae, who introduced the new party charter and announced the changes made to the Central Committee.<sup>63</sup> The KWP charter, which was sent to the Soviet embassy for comment, reflected the changed atmosphere in the communist world. Most obvious was the removal of Stalin’s name from the statement: “The Workers’ Party of Korea is guided in its activities by the theory of Marxism-Leninism.”<sup>64</sup> However, Korean officials failed to make a number of revisions regarding peaceful coexistence recommended by Soviet embassy personnel. For example, while embassy officials had advised the authors to write “The Workers’ Party of Korea advocates all possible support to the people of south Korea in their struggle for liberation from imperialism and feudal exploitation,” without specifying the imperialist nation in mind, i.e. eliminating the word “American,” the final version of the statute reads: “The Workers’ Party of Korea struggles for the liberation of

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<sup>60</sup> Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004): 112.

<sup>61</sup> Koon Woo Nam, *The North Korean Leadership*, p. 103.

<sup>62</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, p. 63.

<sup>63</sup> Remarks on the Draft Charter of the Korean Workers’ Party, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 22-25.

<sup>64</sup> *Third Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea: Documents and Materials* April 24-29, 1956 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956): 387.

the southern half of our country from the American imperialist aggressive forces and the internal reactionary rule.”<sup>65</sup>

According to East German documents obtained by Bernd Schäfer, “GDR officials paid particular attention to the party [charter], subjecting it to a very meticulous and somewhat arrogant exegesis.”<sup>66</sup> The East German diplomats “criticized the absence of a reference to a ‘peaceful way’ to reunite Korea, the party’s ‘shallow’ notions of how to bring about reunification,” and the Koreans’ failure to address the “problem” of Kim Il Sung’s personality cult. As Schäfer notes, the German comrades “sensed from the [charter] an awareness of the imminent danger allegedly posed by influential factions of ‘party enemies’ within the KWP itself.”<sup>67</sup>

The changes to the Central Committee announced by Pak Chong-ae included replacing its Presidium and Political Council with a Standing Committee and Organization Committee. The Standing Committee would now serve as the supreme executive body, making all decisions between meetings of the Central Committee. Party congresses would be held once every four years as opposed to once a year. The Central Committee would consist of 71 permanent members and 45 candidate members. The changes to the membership of the Central Committee and Standing Committee diminished the influence of the “Yan’an” group and Soviet-Koreans; all but two of the eleven full members of the Standing Committee were Kim Il Sung’s former comrades-in-arms or lackeys. Pak Chong-ae and Nam Il, though Soviet-Koreans, were Kim loyalists, leaving Kim Tu-bong and Choe Chang-ik of the “Yan’an” group as the only potential critics in the upper echelons of the KWP leadership.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *Third Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea: Documents and Materials*, p. 387.

<sup>66</sup> Bernd Schäfer, “Weathering the Sino-Soviet Conflict: The GDR and North Korea, 1949-1989,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin 14/15*, Winter 2002-spring 2003 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center): 26.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

<sup>68</sup> The background and affiliations of members of the Standing Committee were: 1. Kim Il Sung (Partisan); 2. Kim Tu-bong (Yan’an); 3. Pak Chong-ae (Soviet, Kim Il Sung circle); 4. Kim Il (Partisan); 5. Choe Yong-gon (Partisan); 6. Pak Kum-ch’ol (Partisan); 7. Yim Hae (Partisan); 8. Kim Kwang-hyeop (Partisan); 9. Nam Il (Soviet, Kim Il Sung circle); 10. Jeong Il-yong (Kim Il Sung circle); 11. Joe Chang-ik (Yan’an); and Candidate Members of the Standing Committee: 1. Kim Chang-man (Yan’an); 2. Pak Ui-wan (Soviet); 3. Yi Hyo-sun (Partisan); 4. Yi Chong-ok (Kim Il Sung circle). RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 411, l. 156. For additional background information on the KWP CC members see; Scalapino and Lee, *Communism in Korea, Part II: The Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), Appendix C, pp. 1351-1380.

As Soviet documents suggest, not all were pleased with the outcome of the congress. Scholars have speculated that some Soviet-Koreans may have managed to meet with CPSU representative Brezhnev during the congress to express their frustrations over irregularities in the DPRK, despite efforts by the KWP leadership to prevent this from occurring.<sup>69</sup> A Russian document confirms that Deputy Premier Pak Ui-wan did meet with Brezhnev and the entire CPSU delegation during an excursion Pak led to the town of Hungnam. The report describes only the events of the excursion and not conversations that took place, but in light of the numerous meetings Pak held with Soviet embassy officials in the wake of the KWP Third Party Congress – discussed below – it seems unlikely that he would have allowed this opportunity to pass without informing the powerful visitor of certain irregularities in the KWP leadership.<sup>70</sup>

Other disaffected members of the KWP voiced their dissatisfaction with the results of the Third Party Congress to officials at the Soviet embassy. On 7 May Soviet-Korean Kim Sung-hwa, Minister of Construction, complained to Ambassador Ivanov:

the spirit of the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU was absent in the work of the [KWP] Congress. A lot was said about the collectivity of the leadership and attempts were made to demonstrate that the principles of collective leadership are observed in the work of the CC KWP and the cult of personality is absent. But this was all very transparent. Really, is there a cult of personality of Pak Hon-yong, in whose direction all criticism is being aimed?<sup>71</sup>

Kim Sung-hwa gave the ambassador a detailed list of Kim Il Sung's former comrades-in-arms and lackeys who had been appointed to leading positions, noting that "not even one Soviet-Korean remains in the apparatus of the CC."<sup>72</sup>

Three days after Ivanov's meeting with Kim Sung-hwa, Bulgarian Ambassador Grigorov came to the Soviet embassy to relay his impressions of the KWP Third Party Congress and to discuss his country's attempts to come to terms with de-Stalinization, particularly, the overthrow of Vulko Chervenkov. Grigorov observed that "apparently, in Korea and China these issues are handled differently. He said that members of the

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<sup>69</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, p. 63

<sup>70</sup> From the Diary of the Ambassador of the USSR in the DPRK, com. Ivanov V.I. for the period from 18 April to 14 May 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 217.

<sup>71</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Minister of Construction, Kim Sung-hwa, 7 May 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 221.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

Albanian, Hungarian, and Romanian delegations taking part in the Third Party Congress said to him that even before that time it was well known to them that there were serious shortcomings in connection with the cult of personality in the KWP, but this was not reflected at the Congress.” Those who spoke at the Congress, Grigorov reported, “denounced the cult of personality of Pak Hon-yong in Southern Korea and not in the DPRK.”<sup>73</sup>

Pak Ui-wan, who had met with Brezhnev and the Soviet delegation during the course of the Congress, began to hold regular meetings with Soviet officials, even though, in his own words, the KWP leadership “related negatively to those Soviet-Koreans who visit the embassy.” In a meeting at his home with Filatov, Pak declared that he did not agree with the changes in the Party leadership, since many of the recent appointees were not qualified to rule. “Many talented people like Kim Tu-bong and Kim Il were not selected for work in the Organization Committee of the KWP CC.” This meant that the Organization Committee would play a greater role in the CC than the Standing Committee “because the Organization Committee meets weekly and decides many of the issues in the work of the Central Committee.” Pak further informed Filatov that “Kim Il Sung announced the distribution of duties among the members of the Standing Committee: Choe Yong-gon will oversee the department for connections with South Korea, Pak Kum-ch’ol—the organizational department and commission for Party control, Kim Chang-man—the department of agitation and propaganda and the department of science, Chong Il-yong—the department of industry (he would be relieved from his duties as deputy prime minister), Pak Chong-ae—the department of cadres, Yim Hae was confirmed as the chair of the department of connections with South Korea. The remaining members and candidates members of the CC Standing Committee will have individual commissions within the Standing Committee.”<sup>74</sup>

Archival documents seldom record the feelings or motivations of individual actors as plainly as we would like, but it would be reasonable to surmise that many party members shared the disappointment about the outcome of the Third Party Congress that

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<sup>73</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with the Bulgarian Ambassador to the DPRK, Comrade Grigorov, 10 May 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 411, Listy 225.

<sup>74</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Deputy Premier of the Council of Ministers, Candidate Member of the Presidium CC KWP, Pak Ui-wan, 7 May 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 108-110.



Pak expressed to Filatov, including those who would later constitute the core of the opposition movement. Pak Ui-wan and some lower officials felt that the party was committing egregious errors by ignoring trends in the international communist movement by not admitting its shortcomings in relation to the cult of personality, collective leadership, and lack of party democracy. Pak stated to Filatov that although the congress was important for the history of the party, “a lot of mistakes were made.” First, “there was very little criticism.” Second, they came out against foreigners—meaning those from the Soviet Union. Furthermore, “denying that the CC KWP does not violate the principles of Marxism-Leninism is also wrong. We have, Pak said, a personality cult. We have not always collectively decided issues, we have broken revolutionary legality.” Expressing a desperate desire to salvage the situation within the KWP, even at the cost of outside intervention, Pak declared that he had thought a great deal about the best way “to change the course of ideological work and ha[d] come to the conclusion that outside help is necessary in this matter.”

He considered that the CC CPSU could, in the necessary manner, assist our leadership to correctly understand Marxism-Leninism and ensure the adherence of Party democracy. All of this will strengthen our Party and prepare it for carrying out the task of reuniting our country.<sup>75</sup>

Speaking to Ivanov on 10 May, Pak presented the shortcomings of the Third Party Congress and the changes made to the party leadership as proof that Kim Il Sung was being led astray by elements hostile to outside influence:

Kim Il Sung has fallen under the influence of several undesirable figures and if this situation is not changed he might fall into an uncomfortable position with the USSR, about which [Pak] wanted to warn him. The propaganda of the DPRK against dogmatism is directed against foreign [propaganda], essentially against Soviet [propaganda]. Under the flag of the development of national traditions, the propaganda of the Soviet Union has been reduced.

It is possible that Pak simply felt it was politically expedient to avoid criticizing Kim Il Sung directly in the presence of Soviet officials, but this seems unlikely in light of his previous statements. Instead, it appears that Pak and like-minded party leaders considered Kim a strong leader who, though lacking sufficient ideological training, could,

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

with proper guidance, be steered in the right direction. Thus, Pak and others concluded that encouraging the DPRK's allies to give Kim such guidance during his forthcoming trip to fraternal countries would be the most effective way to restore proper ideological and economic policies, as well as the influence of the two foreign supported groups, and to ensure North Korea's continued adherence to fraternal socialist norms.

A number of party members besides Pak Ui-wan and Kim Sung-hwa began open and bold criticism of the KWP leadership for the lack of party democracy, the cult of personality of Kim Il Sung, and flawed economic policies. In early May Ambassador to the Soviet Union Yi Sang-jo intrepidly challenged the party leadership during a briefing of DPRK ambassadors to fraternal countries conducted by Foreign Minister Nam Il. On 3 May Ambassador to the GDR Pak Kil-ryun praised Yi's actions during a meeting with Ivanov. "The ambassador of the DPRK to the USSR, Yi Sang-jo, spoke out really well, Pak said. He subjected the work of the Ministry to severe criticism. Describing the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU and how the USSR is carrying out its struggle against the cult of personality of J.V. Stalin, Yi Sang-jo drew attention to the fact that literature is being produced in the DPRK that devotes much space to the cult of personality." According to Pak, Nam Il "corrected" Yi Sang-jo, insisting that "we do not have a cult of personality." Yi retorted and "quoted from a number of publications that in many places were bursting with the name of Kim Il Sung."<sup>76</sup> Since Yi Sang-jo made these comments in the presence of Nam Il, a loyal follower of Kim Il Sung, he clearly knew that Kim Il Sung would learn of them.

### **"We need help from outside:" A Breach of Democratic Centralism**

Yi Sang-jo's sharp and unguarded criticism was followed by a much larger breach of democratic centralism in the wake of the Third Party Congress. The goal of the critics was to bring about changes in the party's ideological and economic work and restore the diminishing influence of the Soviet-Koreans and Chinese returnees as well as the Soviet and Chinese parties. Their strategy was continuous disparagement of policies they deemed damaging and encouragement of foreign criticism of KWP actions during

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<sup>76</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with the Ambassador of the DPRK to the German Democratic Republic, Pak Kil-ryun, 3 May 1956. RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 202-203.

Kim Il Sung's forthcoming trip to fraternal countries. In a 7 May meeting with Ivanov, Pak Kil-ryun sharply criticized the KWP Third Party Congress for not having the spirit of the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU, and attacked the party-state's economic and ideological policies. Pak, a Soviet-Korean, was apparently attempting to encourage Soviet criticism of the KWP leadership during Kim Il Sung's trip to Moscow in June.<sup>77</sup>

Pak Kil-ryun's lobbying in Pyongyang was supplemented by Yi Sang-jo's vigorous efforts to enlist Soviet support to reform the KWP through criticism. After his return to Moscow, Yi held at least two meetings with CPSU officials: on 29 May with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs N.T. Federenko and on 16 June with Director of the Far Eastern Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs I. Kurdyukov.<sup>78</sup> When Federenko asked Yi to share his impressions of conditions in the DPRK, Yi described "severe economic difficulties, a keen shortage of food, housing, a neglect of agriculture, etc.." As regards the Third Party Congress, Yi reported that "the CC KWP leadership thinks that the Congress 'went well and revealed the complete unity of the Party [...], but this is only the official point of view of the CC KWP leadership.'" Although he noted that as ambassador he should have "strictly limited himself to this information," Yi went on to inform Federenko that:

there are other opinions and sentiments about this question and as regards his, Yi Sang-jo's opinion, he also thinks that there were substantial shortcomings in the work of the Congress that reflect serious abnormalities in the work of the Workers Party and the DPRK government.

The unfavorable state of affairs is primarily indicated, Yi Sang-jo pointed out, by the fact that there was no genuine criticism or self-criticism at the Congress and the Congress did not at all take place in the spirit of the issues raised at the XX CPSU Congress. The KWP CC leadership thinks that the shortcomings in the matter of observing the norms of Party life and in other areas revealed at the XX CPSU Congress and, in particular, in the report of N. S. Khrushchev, "The Cult of Personality and Its Consequences," are characteristic of the CPSU and have no relation to the Korean Workers' Party. This policy of the CC KWP leadership also determined the entire course of the Congress.

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<sup>77</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with the Ambassador of the DPRK to the German Democratic Republic, Pak Kil-ryun, 7 May 1956. RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 222-224.

<sup>78</sup> Report by N. T. Fedorenko on a meeting with DPRK Ambassador to the USSR, Yi Sang-jo, 29 May 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 190-196 and Memorandum of a Conversation with DPRK Ambassador to the USSR, Yi Sang-jo, 16 June 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 238-241.

However, Yi informed Federenko, “many Party members, including Congress delegates, [...] think otherwise but they decided not to say this openly at the Congress.” Noting once again that as the DPRK’s ambassador “he must not speak of these things, especially since he knows the point of view of the KWP CC leadership and knows that one does not win plaudits for such conversation,” he nonetheless continued, explaining that “as a Party member he must talk with us about these issues openly and not conceal his opinions.” This was especially the case since the KWP CC leadership was already aware of his opinion, as he had “openly stated it and written about it to the KWP CC Presidium.”<sup>79</sup>

In his meeting with Kurkyukov, ostensibly called to prepare for the arrival of the North Korean delegation, Yi Sang-jo encouraged direct Soviet criticism of KWP internal matters, declaring that “if questions of a military and political nature are discussed along with economic issues in the conversations held between leaders of the Soviet Union and the Korean delegation, then in his personal opinion they ought to be discussed with the involvement of the largest possible number of members of the Korean delegation, for example, with all the members of the Korean Workers’ Party who are in the delegation.” Yi suggested that if “the discussion is to be held in a narrow circle with only Kim Il Sung, Pak Chong-ae, and Nam Il,” the results will be “less than they ought to be since other leading Party officials will not be informed of the substance of the comments and the advice of the CC CPSU.”

As the meeting proceeded, Yi spoke more candidly about the shortcomings in the KWP, stating that “the Korean Workers’ Party and its leadership need serious ideological help from the CC CPSU.”

We expected [...] that a study of the materials of the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU within the Workers’ Party would serve as an impetus to improving the intra-Party situation and to correcting the existing mistakes of the KWP leadership. However, unfortunately the study of the materials of the Twentieth Party Congress in the KWP was done hastily and without the necessary depth. The shortcomings in the intra-Party life of the KWP were neither criticized at the Congress nor after the Congress. Many members of the Workers’ Party see and understand these shortcomings. They are inwardly dissatisfied with the

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<sup>79</sup> Report by N. T. Fedorenko on a meeting with DPRK Ambassador to the USSR, Yi Sang-jo, 29 May 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 190-196.

situation in the Party but decide not to openly criticize these shortcomings, fearing persecution.

Therefore, continued Yi Sang-jo, we need help from outside, and it would be best if Com. Khrushchev or Com. Mao Zedong talked with the KWP leadership about this issue. When doing so it is advisable that critical comments by Com. Khrushchev or Com. Mao Zedong become known not only to Kim Il Sung and the people close to him, but to a broader circle of KWP Party officials.

Nonetheless, like Pak Ui-wan, Yi Sang-jo still supported Kim Il Sung, explaining that Kim “is a young leader with a good revolutionary past, but he has studied little and does not have sufficient ideological training, and this leads him to mistakes.”<sup>80</sup> Still others were openly critical of internal party matters in the presence of Kim Il Sung. Chinese Ambassador to the DPRK Qiao Xiao Guang reported to Amb. Ivanov on 5 November that “even before the opening of the Plenum, [Chairman of the CC of United Unions] So Hwi and other individuals made a series of rather serious accusations directed at the KWP CC and in particular about the issue of cadres.” **[DOCUMENT No. 9]** Thus, through the combination of direct criticism in meetings of the KWP CC and foreign criticism while visiting fraternal countries, the members of the opposition sought to encourage Kim to abandon his Stalinist ways and adopt the newly emerging trends in the international communist movement.

On 1 June 1956 Kim Il Sung departed for his extended trip to nine fraternal countries, visiting the Soviet Union both on his way to and from Eastern Europe.<sup>81</sup> The delegation returned to Pyongyang on 19 July after a largely successful attempt to secure financial assistance.<sup>82</sup> Given the subsequent actions of Kim’s critics, it seems that their strategy of encouraging fraternal criticism of Kim was unsuccessful. Members of the delegation apparently either received insufficient criticism or, the more likely scenario, were immune to the advice of the fraternal parties. As a consequence, Kim’s opponents became convinced that they had to take matters into their own hands. Still believing it was possible to correct the party’s course, they decided to appeal to the CC and

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<sup>80</sup> Report by N. T. Fedorenko on a meeting with DPRK Ambassador to the USSR, Yi Sang-jo, 29 May 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 190-196.

<sup>81</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, p. 76.

<sup>82</sup> Szalontai “You Have No Political Line of Your Own,” p. 91; *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, pp. 92-93.

encourage self-criticism during the upcoming August plenum. Kim's opponents were prepared, however, to replace the party leadership if their grievances were not redressed.

### **Taking Matters into Their Own Hands**

Visits to the Soviet embassy by Kim's opponents had diminished in the wake of the decree forcing Soviet-Koreans either to accept Korean citizenship or be stripped of their posts, but their official business regularly brought many of them into contact with Soviet diplomatic staff. Following Kim Il Sung's return from his month-long trip to Eastern Europe, there was a flurry of activity at both the Soviet and Chinese legations. Over the course of a week, Soviet-Koreans and Chinese returnees met with diplomats at both embassies on what was decidedly unofficial business. Records of the Chinese embassy are not yet accessible, but a Russian memorandum of a conversation between Soviet Charge d' Affaires A.M. Petrov and PRC Charge d' Affaires Chao Ke Xian suggests the general theme of the encounters:

[...] During the discussion comrade Chao further mentioned that individual Korean comrades, in their discussions with officials at the Chinese embassy, show interest in how matters stand with the cult of personality in China. In response to my question about how the Chinese comrades answered that question, Chao said that in answering they quote the well-known decree of the CC Chinese Communist Party, published at that time in the newspaper *Renmin Ribao*.<sup>83</sup>

In their meetings with Soviet embassy officials Kim Il Sung's opponents revealed their intentions as they prepared their strategy for the August Plenum, suggesting that their actions should not be described as an attempted coup d'état. The day after Kim Il Sung returned from his trip to Europe, A.M. Petrov met with Head of the Department of Construction Materials under the Cabinet of Ministers Yi Pil-gyu,<sup>84</sup> an influential member of the "Yan'an" group and a leading critic of Kim's policies. **[DOCUMENT No. 2]** Yi disclosed to Petrov the existence of a plan to criticize Kim in the upcoming plenum:

<sup>83</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Counselor of the Chinese Embassy, Comrade Chao Ke Xian, 3 August 1956. RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 313-314.

<sup>84</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with the head of the department of construction materials under the Cabinet of Ministers Yi Pil-gyu 20 July 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 304-308.

A group of officials consider it necessary to undertake certain actions against Kim Il Sung and his closest associates at the earliest possible opportunity [...] In the DPRK there are such people who can embark on that course and who are currently making appropriate preparations.

Yi enumerated the opposition group's charges against the Kim Il Sung leadership, alluding to the frustration of Soviet-Koreans and Chinese returnees over their dwindling influence in the Central Committee and Ministries:

The personality cult of Kim Il Sung has acquired an intolerable character. He does not tolerate any criticism or self-criticism. The word of Kim Il Sung is law. He has surrounded himself with sycophants and lackeys in the Central Committee and Council of Ministers. It would be enough to say that out of 18 ministers, 9 have a shadowy past. [...] The CC is spreading distrust among functionaries. Functionaries follow one another. There is absolutely no trust and friendship among functionaries in the CC KWP and Council of Ministers.

Yi indicated to what extent the opposition was prepared to go to reverse the situation in the KWP, i.e. to restore the influence of the Soviet and Chinese fraternal parties in the Central Committee and Council of Ministers:

[...] the group sets before itself the task of replacing the present leadership of the CC KWP and government. In his opinion, there are two ways of doing this. The first way is sharp and decisive criticism within the Party and self-criticism. However, Yi said, Kim Il Sung will not likely be in favor of that way and he doubts the success of such an approach. The second way is forcible upheaval. That is a difficult path, Yi said, involving sacrifice.

It is not clear whether Kim Il Sung was to be among the members of the leadership Yi sought to replace since he noted that "Kim Il Sung will not be in favor of that way." Yi may have anticipated that once Kim learned of the widespread dissatisfaction in the ranks of the Party, he would assist in the removal of unqualified officials. Indeed, while Yi was quite forthcoming in his criticism of Kim Il Sung, he expressed even stronger indignation over the elevation of a number of incompetent Kim Il Sung cronies, all of whom received their positions outside the norms of party procedure. Those whom Soviet-Koreans and Chinese returnees wanted to see replaced apparently included Minister of Education Han Sol-ya, the architect of the literary crisis, who, Yi

says, “should be shot;” Presidium member and Partisan Kim Chang-man, whom Yi describes as a “hateful person;” and Kim Il, a member of the Presidium and a Partisan who “is Kim Il Sung’s protégé.” **[DOCUMENT No. 2]**

It is notable that Yi did not include Choe Yong-gon, a Partisan who became head of the Korean Democratic Party in 1945, only to become a member of the Standing Committee in 1956 while technically never a KWP member. Yi even went so far as to praise Choe, indicating that “he respectfully displays himself in work.” Choe was in fact the prime example of an appointment made in violation of Party democracy, since he was appointed to the Standing Committee of the KWP directly from his former position as head of the Democratic Party. Yi may have spared Choe any criticism during his discussion with Petrov because he felt Choe had become critical of Kim Il Sung’s activities and might have been open to joining the criticism at the August Plenum. **[DOCUMENT No. 2]**

It appears that the level of the threat to Kim Il Sung depended upon his actions at the Plenum. If, after all remonstrance’s were aired, Kim refused to make any changes to the leadership of the CC and Council of Ministers, then his critics would exercise their democratic right, enshrined in the charter of the KWP, to vote the Great Leader out of power. Thus, as Balazs Szalontai argues, the opposition was more a “desperate attempt to turn the tide than a serious challenge to Kim’s rule.”<sup>85</sup> The ousting of Kim was to be a last resort.

Yi Pil-gyu’s visit to the Soviet embassy was the first of four Kim’s opponents made from 20-24 July in order to inform Soviet diplomats of their plans. Pak Chang-ok, a Soviet-Korean, Choe Chang-ik, of the “Yan’an group,” and Kim Sung-hwa, another Soviet-Korean, met separately with Soviet embassy officials. The visits to the embassy by Yi Pil-gyu, Pak Chang-ok, Choe Chang-ik, and Kim Sung-hwa, which were almost certainly coordinated, had the desired effect of informing the embassy of their planned action so as to prevent Soviet interference should the event be misinterpreted. Kim’s critics would also have wanted to secure the approval of Soviet officials in Pyongyang, or at least their tacit agreement.

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<sup>85</sup> Szalontai, “You Have No Political Line of Your Own,” 91.



The stream of visitors to the Soviet embassy following Kim Il Sung's return to Korea also included Foreign Minister Nam Il, a staunch Kim supporter. On 24 July Nam Il met with Petrov to "seek advice on what position he should take." **[DOCUMENT No. 3]** According to the Foreign Minister, Pak Chang-ok had informed him that "a group of leading functionaries, including Choe Chang-ik, Kim Sung-hwa and a number of others are prepared, in the coming plenum of the Central Committee, to speak out with severe criticism of Kim Il Sung." Furthermore,

Pak expressed confidence that if he himself, and also if Choe Chang-ik and Kim Sung-hwa speak out with that criticism, then he will receive support from individual members of the Presidium and also from several heads of local Party organizations. Pak said that it would be desirable for Nam Il to join that group and speak out with sharp criticism of Kim Il Sung at the Presidium of the CC KWP and at the Plenum of the CC. The possibility of Choe Yong-gon taking part in the criticism of Kim Il Sung has not been ruled out.

Nam Il had reservations, however, since "serious criticism of Kim Il Sung from Pak Chang-ok and others would be improper."<sup>86</sup> Nam Il explained:

Such a sharp discussion of the problem of the personality cult in the Korean context as Pak Chang-ok and others are preparing to make would lead to undesirable consequences. It might undermine the authority of the existing leadership of the Party and government, discredit Kim Il Sung in the eyes of the Party masses and the entire nation, and stimulate considerable discussion within the Party. **[DOCUMENT No. 3]**

Kim Il Sung was already aware of his critics' grievances since a number of functionaries had openly criticized the Party leadership following the Third Party Congress and similar issues had been raised during Kim's trip to fraternal countries. As Nam Il noted, "the observations of the CC KWP about several shortcomings and mistakes in the work of the KWP were correctly and frankly perceived by Kim Il Sung. Kim Il Sung told Nam Il and several other members of the government delegation that he would take measures in order to completely and fully amend these errors and shortcomings, including the issue of the cult of personality." In the opinion of Kim Il Sung, however, "these shortcomings and errors will not be eliminated immediately, not by discussing

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<sup>86</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK Nam Il, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 301-303.

these issues in a full-scale investigation in the Plenums of the CC or in meetings of Party organs, but little by little without involving the entire Party in the discussion of these issues.” **[DOCUMENT No. 3]** Thus, putting his faith and trust in the Great Leader, Nam Il opted not to join his fellow Soviet-Koreans in criticizing the Party leadership.

Judging from Nam Il’s meeting with Petrov, Soviet diplomats were also apprehensive about the prospective criticism of Kim Il Sung, suggesting that Nam Il dissuade Pak Chang-ok and other Soviet-Korean conspirators from taking part in the criticism since it might give the impression of a Soviet-orchestrated attack on Kim Il Sung and KWP policies. Petrov’s advice thus contradicts Kim Il Sung’s depiction to Manush in 1961 that the opposition was an anti-Party conspiracy orchestrated from the Soviet embassy.

In all probability, Petrov’s advice was a reflection of the short-lived post-Stalin attempt by Kremlin leaders to be less intrusive in the affairs of fraternal parties than they had been under Stalin, in an effort to lessen resentment of Moscow and accompanying nationalist sentiment.

On 28 July and 1 August, Petrov received Nam Il and another Soviet-Korean ally of Kim Il Sung, Pak Chong-ae.<sup>87</sup> Kim Il Sung described the results of this meeting in his closing speech at the August Plenum, revealing the intrigue both sides employed in the days before the crucial gathering:

Rumors reached the leadership of the KWP before the Plenum that, apparently, a person who leads the malcontent and considers the policies of the KWP incorrect is at the Soviet Embassy. The leadership of the KWP was obliged to send Pak Chong-ae and Nam Il to the Soviet Embassy to clarify the situation. It turned out that those rumors were antagonistic and spread by the anti-Party gang. Following that, a letter from the CPSU arrived that indicated that in individual countries where the problem of the personality cult was being examined, certain individuals took advantage of that, expressing their discontent with the leaders. **[DOCUMENT No. 7]**

According to a related document, after Nam Il and Pak Chong-ae were sent to the Soviet Embassy to determine the authenticity of rumors spread by the opposition about a Soviet official sent to Pyongyang to deal with the personality cult, they began to

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<sup>87</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, p. 158.

spread the word that the Soviet ambassador explicitly informed them that the Soviet government was opposed to any criticism of Kim Il Sung. **[DOCUMENT No. 5]** While Petrov was clearly apprehensive about the planned criticism, no evidence has surfaced that the Soviet ambassador explicitly forbade such action. Instead, Petrov simply encouraged Nam Il to dissuade Pak Chang-ok and other Soviet-Koreans from becoming involved so as not to give the impression of a Soviet orchestrated maneuver.

**[DOCUMENT No. 3]**

Kim Il Sung thus clearly had advance knowledge of his opponents' plans. If one is to believe the account in his official biography, Kim learned of their intentions when returning to Pyongyang after winding up his "friendship visits" to socialist countries. "Alighting from the plane with a beaming smile on his face, he was met by high-placed functionaries who had turned out at the airport to welcome him. But as he set his eyes on Choe Chang-ik, at a glance he perceived something not quite right in his looks, and gazed at him sternly and intently," penetrating "even to the black-hearted intentions of Choe Chang-ik."<sup>88</sup>

A more likely explanation is that Kim Il Sung, aware since April of his opponents' criticisms, had received concrete information about their plans from Nam Il, after his meetings with Petrov. On 31 August, the last day of the Plenum, a departmental head of the KWP, Ko Hui-man, mentioned to the first secretary of the Soviet embassy, G.Ye. Samsanov, that "the intention of this group to use the forthcoming Plenum for anti-Party attacks against some executives in the Party and government was known before the Plenum."<sup>89</sup> As Lankov concludes, aware of the impending challenge, "one of Kim Il Sung's foremost concerns must have been reducing the number of potential trouble-makers."<sup>90</sup> A 29 July meeting between Soviet Ambassador V.I. Ivanov and Pak Ui-wan verifies that Kim Il Sung moved in that direction by dispatching one of his critics, Kim

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<sup>88</sup> Baik Bong, *Kim Il Sung, Biography [III]: From Building Democratic Korea to Chullima Flight* (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1970): 551.

<sup>89</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between G.Ye. Samsanov and Ko Hui-man, 31 August 1956, AVPRF, Fond 0102, Opis 12, Delo 6, Papka 68, cited in Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, p. 164.

<sup>90</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, p. 165.

Sung-hwa, to Moscow for study just two days before the scheduled start of the plenum, explaining that he “was mixed up in some unsavory business and had to leave.”<sup>91</sup>

As an additional protective measure, Kim Il Sung postponed the opening of the plenum for nearly a month, from 2 August to 30 August.<sup>92</sup> Ko Hui-man later explained to First Secretary of the Soviet Foreign Ministry S.P. Lazarev that “having been informed that the attack had to take place at the Central Committee Plenum, the leaders of the Central Committee kept delaying the Plenum to confuse the group. The date was announced only on the eve of the first day of the Plenum, thus disorganizing their actions.”<sup>93</sup>

Following up on the criticism Kim received in Moscow, the CPSU CC sent a letter to the KWP CC on 2 August offering further criticism of the cult of personality in the DPRK and the lack of collectivity in the party leadership. The Great Leader followed up on the letter after two weeks by informing Ambassador Ivanov on 13 August that elections to the Supreme People’s Assembly would be held later in the fall of 1956. At the same time, Kim was attempting to placate those critical of his policies in Moscow, the opposition in Pyongyang, aware of Moscow’s intervention, redoubled its efforts and increased the intensity of direct attacks on Kim and the party leadership in late August. During a meeting of the Standing Committee, Choe Chang-ik criticized members of the leadership widely considered unqualified, calling for their dismissal. Kim responded to the intensification of the attacks by increasing his efforts to blackmail potential opponents into submission. Pak Ui-wan was one of those coerced to support Kim at the plenum through blackmail, according to Yi Sang-jo. During a 22 August meeting, “Kim Il Sung told Pak Ui-wan that he had a significant amount of compromising material against him about squandering state resources and threatened to reveal this material if Pak Ui-wan spoke out against the leadership of the KWP with criticism.” **[DOCUMENT No. 5]**

The limitations of relying on the records of former fraternal countries to construct a narrative of this pivotal event are revealed in the lack of information on the domestic front of the campaign to criticize Kim and the party leadership. While there are

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<sup>91</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with the Charge d’ Affaires of the Chinese Embassy in Pyongyang, Com. Chao Ke Xian, RGANI, Fond 5, Opus 28, Delo 410, Listy 313-314.

<sup>92</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, p. 164.

<sup>93</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between S.P. Lazarev and Ko Hui-man, 18 September 1956, AVPRF, Fond 0102, Opus 12, Delo 4, Papka 68, cited in Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, pp. 164-5.

memoranda of conversations showing North Korean leaders encouraging Soviet officials to disparage the party leadership in Moscow, there are only passing references to the direct and personal criticisms of Kim and the party leadership during sessions of the KWP CC in Pyongyang. Until additional records are released and North Korean archives become accessible, the question of the amount of criticism Kim received at home before even departing on his “friendship visits” will remain open.

### **The August Plenum**

The official agenda for the Plenum listed only two items: a report on Kim Il Sung’s recent trip to fraternal countries and a discussion of the National Health Service. As one might expect, however, the opposition group’s plans and Kim’s own countermeasures dominated the proceedings. The accounts of the Plenum that Kim Il Sung and Pak Ui-wan relayed to the Soviet embassy provide a much more detailed description of the event than has previously been available, as well as widely varying interpretations. **[DOCUMENTS Nos. 4 & 7]**

In a meeting with Ambassador Ivanov on 1 September, Kim Il Sung focused on what he termed the “anti-Party” activities of his critics. Minister of Trade Yun Kong-hum, for example, “made accusations that the Workers Party rejected the decree of the Twentieth Party Congress, did not follow the principles of Marxism-Leninism,” and preserved “very serious consequences of the personality cult.” Kim reported that Plenum participants were “outraged by the antagonistic manner of Yun’s speech” and “demanded that he be prevented from speaking.” **[DOCUMENT No. 4]** Pak Ui-wan confirmed to Ivanov six days later that Kim’s allies used this tactic to silence the remaining critics before they could speak. **[DOCUMENT No. 7]**

Kim Il Sung informed Ivanov about the four members of the “Yan’an” group—So-hwi, Yi Pil-gyu, Kim Kang, and Yun Kong-hum—who left the plenum and fled to China. He also described in detail the serious measures taken against his critics: So-hwi, Yi Pil-gyu, and Kim Kang were expelled from the Party *in absentia*; Choe Chang-ik was “removed from the CC Presidium;” and Pak Chang-ok was “removed from the post of Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and removed from the ranks of the CC.”

**[DOCUMENT No. 4]** As Szalontai observes, Kim’s acts of repression, “which ran counter to the new trend in Soviet and Chinese policies, could not pass unnoticed.”<sup>94</sup>

In his account to Ivanov on 6 September, Pak Ui-wan offered a much more detailed account of the proceedings, describing a carefully orchestrated offensive against the leadership’s critics. **[DOCUMENT No. 7]** Pak charged that Kim Il Sung’s address touched upon the problem of the personality cult only “in connection with the status of work in the area of propaganda,” and that the audience spontaneously burst into praise throughout the speech “without any reason.” He described the next two speeches, by chairman of the State Planning Committee, Yi Tong-ok and secretary of the provincial committee of the Party from the province of Northern Hamgyong, Kim Tae-gong, as “sycophantic,” though Kim Tae-gong “singled out and sharply criticized the work of the Ministry of Trade and the activities of the unions.”

Pak’s account of Yun’s speech is similar to that of Kim Il Sung, especially in his description of Yun’s accusations and the Standing Committee’s hostile reaction. However, Pak’s account also refers indirectly to Yun’s comments on the lack of party democracy when he complains that “Choe Yong-gon is the leader of another party and was immediately named to the post of Deputy Chairman of the KWP, a clear violation of party democracy.” In response to this comment, “Choe Yong-gon stood and called Yun a dog and insulted him in every manner.” **[DOCUMENT No. 7]**

According to Pak, the evening session of 30 August contained more sycophantic speeches by Minister of Finance Yi Tyu-yong, Minister of Foreign Affairs Nam Il, and the chairman of the CC of the Union of Democratic Youth, Pak Yong-guk. Each of these speeches praised the KWP and its leadership while deriding the ‘anti-party’ group. While generally optimistic, Foreign Minister Nam Il’s speech was less flattering than the others, recognizing, according to Pak, “that unfortunately the decree of the March Plenum of the CC, where Kim Il Sung talked about the personality cult, was not brought to the attention of the members of the Party.” Nam Il’s criticism of Yun Kong-hum, however, was as bitter as that of others from the Standing Committee.

Speaking next, Choe Chang-ik, one of the leaders of the opposition group, evidently recognized that his plan to make Kim recognize his shortcomings had already

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<sup>94</sup> Balazs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*. p. 98.

failed, and therefore chose not to attack the leadership. Instead, according to Pak Ui-wan, Choe “pointed out that the policies of the Party were correct, but that it is necessary to talk about the personality cult, a sore issue for the Party.” Upon completing his speech, however, a number of questions were given to Choe, “from which it became clear that he subscribes to the ideology of the factional group.” [DOCUMENT No. 7]

Choe’s speech was followed by those of Kim Chang-man and the chairman of the Party committee of Southern P’yongan Kim Man-gum, who attacked Yun Kong-hum, describing him as “a person who is morally corrupt, who does not eat any other meat than veal”—presumably a mark of extravagance—and who “squanders large sums of money.” Furthermore, Kim Man-gum called for an investigation into the activities of Yun Kong-hum and Choe Chang-ik, urging that both be jailed.

Kim Il Sung then spoke again. He recounted the history of the opposition group, stressing that Choe Chang-ik and Pak Chang-ok were its leaders. Implying that criticism was equal to “plotting,” he accused the group of attempting to overthrow the government and “seize power in their hands.”

Kim was followed by the chairman of the Party Committee of South Hamgyong province, Hwang Tong-min, who used his allotted time to attack “those who expressed discontent.” The head of the department of propaganda and agitation of the CC KWP, Yi Il-gong, in a carefully prepared response to the restrained remarks by Nam Il on the decree of the March Plenum of the CC and the personality cult, stated that “the Third Party Congress was completely guided by the ideas of the Twentieth Party Congress and that after the Congress, the CC of the KWP resolved the shortcomings connected with the personality cult.”

Pak Ui-wan then provided a detailed account of Choe Yong-gon’s speech that outlined the “concentrated program against the party and government” of Yun Kong-hum, Choe Chang-ik, Pak Chang-ok and others. It should be noted that some members of the opposition group, including Yi Pil-gyu considered Choe Yong-gon sympathetic to their cause. However, it appears that Kim Il Sung used Choe Yong-gon as a decoy luring them to confide in him. Choe Yong-gon proceeded to make accusations against other members of the “anti-party” group such as So Hwi, who, being guilty of ‘negativism’ “told two

Koreans coming from China that they would work for ten years in the DPRK without getting a higher title than Major-General.” [DOCUMENT No. 7]

In his speech, Pak Chang-ok denied any involvement with the opposition group and expressed his frustration at having been removed from his former position following the December Plenum of the CC KWP, stating that the Plenum “took a very strict and unfair position in relation to him.” According to Pak Ui-wan, Pak Chang-ok was interrupted by calls from the Standing Committee and the hall and was not permitted to continue speaking.

Pak Ui-wan gave little detail about Kim Il Sung’s closing speech other than that he suggested that “organizational measures” be taken against the opposition. After finishing his account of the plenum, however, evidently fearful of further retaliation against the Soviet and Yan’an groups beyond the immediate expulsions, and mindful of Kim Il Sung’s earlier blackmail attempt, Pak, a Soviet-Korean, indicated that he wished to renounce his North Korean citizenship, regain his Soviet citizenship, and be reinstated in the ranks of the CPSU. [DOCUMENT No. 7]

Why did the opposition’s attempt to encourage Kim Il Sung to reform through pointed criticism fail so miserably? Two reasons in particular stand out. First, the critics did not garner enough support from other members of the Central Committee and Standing Committee. Indeed, a number of Soviet-Koreans, including Nam Il and Pak Chong-ae, refused to join their compatriots and even informed Kim of their plans. Presumably there was very little they could offer those who sided with them that Kim Il Sung and his associates could not. Second, following the KWP Third Party Congress, the “Yan’an” group and Soviet-Koreans were simply outnumbered in the Standing Committee and Central Committee. These factors, combined with Kim’s own counteroffensive, made success nearly impossible.

### **Foreign Meddling: Anastas Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai Come to Pyongyang**

Sometime after the disastrous morning session of 30 August, four members of the opposition group – Minister of Trade Yun Kong-hum, Chairman of the CC of United Unions So Hwi, Deputy Minister of Culture Kim Chang-il, and Head of the Department of Construction Materials Yi Pil-gyu – crossed into China near Dandong, where they



were detained by Chinese border guards. **[DOCUMENT No. 4]** Word of their flight reached fraternal embassies in Pyongyang, and on 4 September the Soviet and Chinese ambassadors met to discuss the issue, as well as the results of the Plenum as a whole. PRC Ambassador Qiao Xiao Guang described the situation as “an extremely serious event [...] concerning the relations between the DPRK and the PRC” and explained that the Korean government had filed a petition demanding the return of “the guilty individuals.” The Chinese government, which had been “immediately informed about what had occurred,” announced that “the noted individuals are not simple border crossers and that their forcible return is impossible.” Furthermore, Qiao reported that “Korean border guards urged the abovementioned individuals to return to the DPRK; however, they all categorically refused.” Ambassador Ivanov, for his part, seems to have attempted both to reassure Qiao that the Soviet Union was not responsible for the actions of the opposition group, and to probe the PRC Ambassador about possible Chinese meddling in the proceedings of the plenum. Ivanov carefully stated that “the issues that arose in the KWP are serious and were not stimulated by any outside factors, Soviet or Chinese, but were a domestic process taking place within the KWP.” **[DOCUMENT No. 4]**

The following day, DPRK Ambassador to Moscow Yi Sang-jo delivered a letter to Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs N.T. Federenko detailing Kim Il Sung’s abuses and requesting a meeting with either N.S. Khrushchev or A.I. Mikoyan. **[DOCUMENT No. 5]** Yi’s goal was to press upon the Soviet leadership the gravity of the situation in the KWP CC, in hopes that the CPSU CC and the CCP CC would come to the assistance of the KWP in what he described as a “difficult situation created as a result of the rash and incorrect repression taken by the leadership of the CC KWP against comrades who spoke with criticism.” **[DOCUMENT No. 5]** Yi’s appeal for assistance was successful; the Presidium of the CPSU discussed the situation in North Korea on 6 September 1956. Having received a report from Ambassador Ivanov, Soviet leaders decided to consult the North Korean delegates to the Chinese 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress later in the month. After consultations in Beijing, the Soviet and Chinese delegates opted to send a joint party delegation to Pyongyang. Thus, Kremlin trouble-shooter A.I. Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai, former commander of the Chinese troops during the Korean War, were dispatched to Pyongyang to investigate the account given by the four members of the “Yan’an” group

who had fled to China. As Balazs Szalontai notes, this coordinated action “indicates that in mid-1956 Sino-Soviet relations were still relatively harmonious.”<sup>95</sup> The choice of emissaries must have caused Kim Il Sung considerable anxiety, since Mikoyan had recently unseated Hungary’s “little Stalin,” Matyas Rakosi in June, and Peng Dehuai had continually humiliated Kim Il Sung during the Korean War.

The most important files on the intervention by Mikoyan and Peng have not yet been opened to researchers, but the diary of the Soviet ambassador provides fragmentary evidence of this pivotal event that allows us to assess the basis of Kim’s subsequent accusations of Chinese and Soviet meddling. Approximately one month after Mikoyan and Peng departed from Pyongyang, Ivanov met with the Charge d’ Affaires of the Chinese embassy, Chao Ke Xian, to inform him about a meeting he had recently held with Kim Il Sung about following through on a number of promises the North Korean leader allegedly made to Mikoyan and Peng. **[DOCUMENT No. 8]** Among other things, Kim had agreed to publish the decrees of the August and September plenums, but he informed the ambassador that he had *not* promised Mikoyan and Peng that he would publish the decrees, only that he would *consider* the matter.

Five days after the event, the Koreans had published what Ivanov described as a “pithy summary” of the September Plenum, which discussed only two issues: the Plenum’s success in deciding “organizational matters” and the need to observe Leninist norms and principles in party life. Kim Il Sung explained to Ivanov that details of the difficulties encountered in the decision-making process were “omitted consciously” since the decree on the August Plenum “was not published and in his opinion there is no need to report in the press that these decrees were rash.” Moreover, “the CC KWP has never published its decrees on organizational issues and for this reason it is necessary to start publication with a good decree and not with a bad one.” **[DOCUMENT No. 8]**

Ivanov encouraged Kim to resolve the matter by simply publishing the decrees of the August and September Plenums. The Korean leader claimed that they would be published, but only in a “separate brochure and distributed for discussion in party organizations.” Furthermore, “the section in which he quotes Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai will be omitted from his speech.” By this omission, Kim explained, “the aim of not

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<sup>95</sup> Balazs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, p. 98.

revealing the very fact of the visit of Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai to Korea is achieved, not giving the Party masses reason to believe that the decree of the September Plenum was passed under pressure from fraternal parties or that fraternal parties were interfering in our internal affairs.” **[DOCUMENT No. 8]**

Ivanov proceeded to ask the opinion of the Chinese charge d’ affaires’ regarding some of the more controversial issues connected with the joint intervention. One issue in particular stood out, revealing that Kim Il Sung had good reason to claim meddling by the fraternal parties. Pak Il-u, a prominent member of the “Yan’an” group and allegedly the personal representative of Mao Zedong in Pyongyang, had served as Minister of the Interior before being purged and imprisoned in 1955. During a meeting with Kim Il Sung, Peng Dehuai requested that Pak Il-u and another member of the “Yan’an” group, former Korean Peoples’ Army officer Pan Ho-san, be released from prison and returned to China. On 5 November, Ivanov was informed by Ambassador Qiao Xiao Guang that “the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party shows great interest” in the measures taken by the Koreans “to carry out the decision of the September Plenum.” Ivanov replied that the CC KWP had reportedly “decided to release Pak Il-u from imprisonment,” though he did not indicate whether Pak would be allowed to depart for China. **[DOCUMENT No. 9]**

Qiao asked Ivanov how he thought the “Korean friends view the visit of Comrades Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai to the DPRK.” Ivanov responded that “to judge by the course of the September Plenum, the reaction of the friends should be considered positive, however to confirm this categorically would be premature.” Qiao responded that he too “has not yet reached a specific conclusion regarding the reaction of the friends to the visit of comrades Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai.” **[DOCUMENT No. 9]**

Of course, as indicated by the conversation five years later between Kim Il Sung and Myftiu Manush cited in the introduction to this essay, the North Korean leader strongly resented the intervention.<sup>96</sup> As Kim’s biography later claimed, “at this time, the modern revisionists exposed themselves in this international communist movement, and engaged in shameless intervention in the internal affairs of fraternal parties and fraternal

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<sup>96</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between Kim Il Sung and Manush [Myftiu] composed by Albanian Ambassador to the DPRK, Hasan Alimerko, 4 October 1961, AQPPSH, MPP Korese, V. 1961, D4, translated by Enkel Daljani.

countries, preaching the false line of imperialism and shrinking from the revolution.”<sup>97</sup>

Moreover:

[Kim Il Sung] dealt a decisive blow without restraint on the counterrevolutionary factional elements, in the interests of the Party, the revolution and the people. At the same time he soundly smashed the intrigues of the great-power chauvinists and revisionists who tried to interfere in internal affairs, making use of these elements.

But for him, this was far from being a crisis that called for all his energies. As an outstanding strategist, Comrade Kim Il Sung used this struggle forced on him to more firmly establish *Juche*, and led the revolution in a great upsurge, defeating the revisionists and the great-power chauvinists in the international arena, and enhanced the spirit of self-reliance among his own people.”<sup>98</sup>

Ivanov and Qiao also discussed the flight of Yun Kong-hum, Li Pil-gyu, So Hwi and Kim Chang-il, who were still in China. The Soviet ambassador asked if the four knew that as a result of the Mikoyan/Peng intervention they had been reinstated as members of the KWP, or whether they intended to return to the DPRK. Qiao replied that they are aware of the decision, but “not wishing to return to the DPRK, they want to ask the government of the DPRK to allow their families to depart to China since they know also that the Korean government is not pressing for their return to the DPRK.” Qiao said further that

Yun Kong-hum, So Hwi, Kim Chang-il and Yi Pil-gyu, in an address to the CC CCP and CC CPSU, blamed the Korean leadership for destroying a number of notable party actors in the period after liberation and during the war, for leading the country and party with anti-democratic methods, and for incorrectly appointing and cultivating leading cadres. In connection with this, they consider Pak Chong-ae, Pak Kum-chul, Kim Chang-man and Han Song-do as unqualified to occupy leading posts in the party; finally, they charge that the leadership is not carrying out a struggle against the cult of personality of Kim Il Sung. [DOCUMENT No. 9]

In closing, Ivanov informed Qiao Xiao Guang that the Korean leadership had released Yi Sang-jo from his duties as ambassador to Moscow, but Yi refused to return to

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<sup>97</sup> Baik Bong, *Kim Il Sung: Biography [II]*, 1970): 553.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, p. 549.

the DPRK and would in all likelihood remain in the PRC. In the event, Yi remained in the USSR, which later rejected Pyongyang's demands that he be extradited.<sup>99</sup>

A report by the Deputy Director of the CC CPSU Department for Relations with International Communist Parties of 15 October further enumerates the demands Mikoyan and Peng had made of Kim Il Sung: to suspend any further attacks on "Yan'an" and Soviet-Koreans and to reinstate all those expelled from the Party and CC after the first day of the plenum. However, as the report explains to the CC CPSU, "it is clear that Kim Il Sung essentially rejected the advice concerning the publication of the entire text of the decree of the Plenum of the CC KWP."<sup>100</sup> Kim did, however, reinstate the purged members of the opposition group. Nam Il informed Ambassador Ivanov on 19 November that Pak Chang-ok was named director of construction of the Madong Cement Factory while Choe Chang-ik was offered the post of director of security for historical monuments of material culture, which he declined in favor of a return to his academic research.<sup>101</sup> The reinstatements proved to be temporary, however. Just two years later Kim Il Sung exploited the emerging rift between the USSR and China to eliminate completely the influence of the Soviet-Koreans and "Yan'an" group in the KWP CC.

### **Conclusions**

While North Korean sources will in all likelihood remain inaccessible for some time, it is possible to begin to construct a narrative of the opposition movement of 1956 through a careful analysis of the evidence now available from Russian, Chinese, and Eastern European archives. While these documents provide a much clearer view of the events leading up to the plenum and of the proceedings of the plenum itself than has earlier been possible, conclusions must nevertheless be tentative. Indeed, the new evidence raises as many questions as it answers. Why, for example, did Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai not simply replace Kim Il Sung, as Soviet leaders had done in Eastern Europe? How critical of Kim's policies were the leaders of the fraternal countries he visited in the summer of 1956? Was Kim Il Sung driven more by his opponents' breach

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<sup>99</sup> Schäfer, "Weathering the Sino-Soviet Conflict," p. 27.

<sup>100</sup> Letter from Yi Sang-jo to the Central Committee of the Korean Workers Party, 5 October 1956, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 233-295.

<sup>101</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with North Korean Foreign Minister, Nam Il, 19 November 1956, RGANI Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 411, List. 293.

of democratic centralism or by a desire to eliminate the two foreign-backed groups at a time he was distancing himself and the North Korean party-state from fraternal socialism and internationalism? What drove Kim's critics to attempt to change the course of events in the DPRK? Did the few Soviet-Koreans who participated in the opposition seek only to regain lost stature in the Party? Did members of the "Yan'an" group perceive themselves as the next target of repression, following the elimination of the "Domestic" group and the limited attack on the Soviet-Koreans?

We now know, however, the specific charges that were leveled against the party leadership and specifically against Kim Il Sung. We can conclude that the opposition saw replacing Kim Il Sung as a last resort. If Kim failed admit to his mistakes and make appropriate changes in party democracy and the personality cult, then the opposition was prepared to vote him out of power—a democratic right guaranteed in the recently revised KWP charter. Some semblance of political life thus seems to have existed in the DPRK prior to the 1956 August Plenum.

We also now know from the newly available documentary evidence that Kim was well aware of his critics' intentions and foiled their attempts. By postponing the start of the plenum, he was able to blackmail and coerce members of the leadership who may have been sympathetic to the opposition. Earlier accounts of the August Plenum describe an attempted coup d'état, perhaps because such rumors served the purposes of both Kim and his critics. For South Korean intelligence, and later South Korean scholars, rumors of an attempt to overthrow Kim Il Sung may have been welcome because they demonstrated a lack of popular support for the leader. Similarly, within North Korea, the rumors benefited Kim Il Sung since few would question his motives in eliminating such conspirators from the party leadership.

Taking into account that reliance on Russian documents tends naturally to exaggerate Soviet agency, the historical record presented here makes it clear that in 1956 the Soviet embassy still played a key role in the affairs of the Korean party. After surviving this serious attempt by Moscow and Beijing to meddle in internal party matters in Korea, Kim Il Sung redoubled his efforts to limit the influence of the foreign communist parties within the KWP. The Sino-Soviet rift soon gave him the means to

pursue a markedly more autonomous path, ever vigilant against a renewed threat from his patrons.

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## II. DOCUMENT APPENDIX

### DOCUMENT No. 1

**Memorandum of Conversation with Vice Premier of the Cabinet of Ministers of the DPRK and Member of the Presidium, KWP CC, Pak Chang-ok, 12 March 1956.**

*[Source: Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (hereafter RGANI), Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 74-85. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by James F. Person.]*

From the diary of  
Counsellor of the Embassy of the  
USSR in the DPRK  
Comrade Filatov S.N.

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION  
WITH VICE PREMIER OF THE CABINET OF MINISTERS OF THE DPRK AND  
MEMBER OF THE PRESIDIUUM CC KWP PAK CHANG-OK

12 March 1956

Having met at the initiative of the embassy, comrade Pak Chang-ok indicated that he had long prepared to meet with me to explain his thoughts about the decree of the Presidium CC KWP from 18 January of this year [titled] "About the Future Struggle Against Reactionary Bourgeois Ideology in Literature and Art."

Before sharing my thoughts on the previously mentioned decree of the Presidium CC KWP, [Pak Chang-ok stated] I would like to say that over the past ten years of working in Korea, that is, from the period of the founding and strengthening of the people's authority in North Korea, I, of course, had inadequacies and made a number of mistakes. It is now easier to evaluate the path our party has already traversed; to assess the actions of individual party functionaries, to hide the shortcomings and mistakes and outline a future course to strengthen the party as a guiding and leading force of the Korean people.

The mistakes that I made in my work, I always admitted to, I myself on numerous occasions revealed them and informed the Political Council and Presidium CC KWP.



It is necessary to point out, Pak Chang-ok said, that in the Soviet Union I was involved in insignificant party work, but in Korea I was pushed into important party and state work. Lacking the necessary experience, I made a number of mistakes when deciding difficult matters of state. Furthermore, when I arrived in Korea I did not know the country, did not know the party leaders, who, if truth be told, were few in number, and when forcing me to assume leadership positions, I made mistakes. What's more, it must be said that the situation was complicated in Korea both before and especially during the war. A lot of difficulties continue to exist even now.

That which I am going to say to you, Pak said, I have declared on more than one occasion both at meetings of the Political Council and in the Presidium CC KWP.

Regarding the decree of the Presidium CC KWP of 18 January of this year, I would like to impart to you that I can not agree with the line of accusations which were made against me in that ruling. First of all, Pak said, I never carried out a factional struggle and never came out against the party line. I did not distort the party line in relation to the United Front, did not suggest reconciliation and collusion with enemies. All of the ten years of working in Korea I unselfishly struggled for the party line.

I asked comrade Pak Chang-ok how it can be explained that the Presidium of the CC KWP made such a decision.

He explained that the question of the work of Soviet Koreans and especially of those who worked in the Political Council and in the CC KWP should not be placed first. Even in 1953 after the death of Hegai a number of local functionaries and especially comrades Choe Yong-gon, Choe Chang-ik and Ten Il-len raised the matter of releasing me and comrade Pak Yong-bin from our posts in the apparatus of the CC KWP; but then Kim Il Sung did not agree with them and spoke at the Political Council with criticism of their actions. In spite of this, comrade Choe Yong-gon sought the dismissal of a number of leading army officers who came from the Soviet Union.

At the start of 1954 the above-mentioned functionaries once again raised the matter of the need to dismiss a number of Soviet Koreans from leadership posts. Comrade Kim Il Sung did not agree with them – however, after a month and a half he gave the order that a few functionaries from the Soviet Union should be demoted to more subordinate positions and this was done.

As you know, Pak declared, at the start of 1954, Kim Il and I then served as vice-chairmen of the CC KWP, at the suggestion of comrade Kim Il Sung we were reassigned to work in the Cabinet of Ministers – [as] Deputy Premiers. At the same time I was confirmed chairman of the State Planning Committee and Kim Il as Minister of Agriculture. This transition did not go too smoothly. When Kim Il Sung spoke during a session of the Political Council with such a suggestion, comrades Pak Chong-ae, and Kim Tu-bong expressed their opinions about the inexpediency of my and Kim Il's move to positions in the Cabinet of Ministers.

My promotion to the post of deputy premier and chairman of the State Planning Committee brought me closer to Kim Il Sung. All matters related to the rehabilitation of our economy were decided in the government at the initiative of the State Planning Committee. Comrade Kim Il Sung always supported me and demanded that things be put in order in the ministries. I, said Pak, sought to carry out neatly the directives of Comrade Kim Il Sung for which he repeatedly held me up as an example. This caused some stirring among a number of functionaries and especially among Ten Il-yen, Choe Chang-ik and others.

At the start of 1955 I started to notice that Comrade Kim Il Sung began to display dissatisfaction with me and my work. My attempts to ascertain the cause of his discontent in talks with comrade Kim Il Sung did not lead to anything. Comrade Kim Il Sung did not desire to discuss this matter. I saw, said Pak, that someone had begun to influence comrade Kim Il Sung. Furthermore, this influence adversely affected the work of the State Planning Committee.

It must be said that all of the members of the Political Council, with the exception of Pak Kum-chul, negatively related to Kim Il Sung's suggestion about the co-optation of comrade Choe Yong-gon into the composition of the Political Council. Comrade Kim Il Sung did not strive to get the agreement of the Political Council about the co-optation of comrade Choe Yong-gon into the Political Council and unilaterally went with the proposal to a plenum. It is necessary to mention that the majority of the members of the CC KWP recognized comrade Choe Yong-gon as the head of a petty-bourgeois party and were surprised by his appearance at a Presidium of the Plenum.

I think that with his acceptance into the Political Council the collection of material against me, Pak Yong-bin and other Soviet Koreans started. Comrade Kim Il Sung began to express more and more displeasure with my work, the work of Pak Yong-bin and even that of Pak Chong-ae.

Last August, in my absence, comrade Kim Il Sung summoned all of my subordinates in the State Planning Committee and ordered them to compose material about the poor work of the State Planning Committee. They carried out his order. However, the material was so poorly prepared that comrade Kim Il Sung decided not to even talk with me about the shortcomings in the work of the State Planning Committee.

On 21 November comrade Kim Il Sung spoke during a meeting of economic advisors with harsh criticism of the work of the State Planning Committee and of me personally. I considered the points of his speech as guidelines and took measures to improve the work of the State Planning Committee.

Prior to the December CC KWP Plenum, Pak said, I was twice called to Kim Il Sung where he made a number of accusations against me.

First of all he said to me that my attitude toward proletarian authors, including Han Sol-ya, was incorrect. I incorrectly supported writers who arrived from the south. He said that after the death of Hegai I did not excuse a number of Soviet Koreans from their posts who, together with me composed a group and all matters were decided like a family.

In response I told Comrade Kim Il Sung that I did not do anything without the permission of the Political Council and his personal orders. Until the end of 1948 I was in unimportant work and did not have any influence on the work of the CC KWP. Regarding those who came from South Korea, the Political Council of the CC repeatedly made pronouncements demanding that the possibility to work be given to those people and that they be supported. Furthermore, you, Comrade Kim Il Sung repeatedly instructed us and demanded support and correct relations with those workers who came from the south.

Regarding the Koreans who came from the Soviet Union, I did not place them in leading posts. That was done before me. Furthermore, all of them were confirmed by the

Political Council and many of the functionaries were nominated to the leading posts at his, Kim's, initiative.

I directed comrade Kim Il Sung's attention, Pak said, to the fact that all of the matters which he had raised related to the period 1947 – 1952 and that discussing them at the present time is hardly constructive, however, if at present a number of members of the Political Council consider that in these matters mistakes were made, then why must I carry all of the blame for these blunders. All of these matters were decided in the Political Council so it means that all of the Political Council should be responsible.

Comrade Kim Il Sung agreed with my thoughts and asked me to remain calm and continue to work actively in the Political Council and Cabinet of Ministers.

In spite of the meeting and agreement with my argument, at the end of the meeting of the December Plenum of the CC KWP, comrade Kim Il Sung delivered a speech. His entire speech was devoted to the theme of the Soviet Korean affair. I understood that political accusations were being made, and I decided once again to speak with comrade Kim Il Sung and express my thoughts. In a discussion with me, comrade Kim Il Sung once again repeated the now notorious accusations. However, at the end of the discussion in which Pak Chong-ae took part, comrade Kim Il Sung said you have already been criticized enough, quietly continue to work.

I learned that Kim Il Sung's speech made at the CC Plenum was distributed by the Pyongyang City Committee to all primary organizations and it is being discussed in party meetings.

On 27-29 December [1955], Pak said, there was an enlarged plenum of the CC KWP in which over 400 people participated. At the initiative of comrade Kim Il Sung, I, comrades Pak Yong-bin, Ki Sek-pak, Ten Dong-hek and Ten Yul were compelled to deliver speeches admitting our shortcomings. The gathering was prearranged and as I was the first to speak was given around 100 questions. I was accused of wanting to become the face of the state, and if not the face, then the second in command. For this I rallied a number of dependable Soviet-Korean cadres. Pak Yong-bin and I, taking refuge in the collectivity of the leadership, put ourselves forward and beseeched the role of the Vozhd, comrade Kim Il Sung. We were, as a number of participants demonstrated, conduits of bourgeois ideology to the party.

I asked comrade Pak Chang-ok to describe the character of the speeches of a few members of the leadership.

Comrade Pak Chang-ok explained that the speeches of Yim Hae – representative of the Korean Communist Party attached to the KWP, and Han Sol-ya deserve mention.

Comrade Yim Hae declared that he has at his disposal material which describes the factional activities of Pak Chang-ok, Pak Yong-bin and other Soviet Koreans.

Comrade Han Sol-ya said that Pak Chang-ok wanted to become the first person in the state, advanced himself and by his activities depreciated the role of comrade Kim Il Sung. He said that Pak Chang-ok and Pak Yong-bin did not permit the Party and the people to express their good feelings and attitude to their *Vozhd*, etc. Pak stated that all of these accusations he spurned as absurd and baseless.

At the end of the meeting comrade Kim Il Sung delivered a speech that in an even harsher tone repeated what he said during the December Plenum of the CC. He made a specific reference to 15 functionaries who arrived from the Soviet Union as followers of Hegai. His speech, like the previous one, was distributed to all primary organizations of Pyongyang city and the provincial committees and read aloud at Party meetings. Once again the Soviet Koreans were discussed everywhere.

On 30 December, Pak Chang-ok said, I asked comrade Kim Il Sung to receive me and listen to my explanation. Comrade Kim Il Sung invited me to his home and we talked for over 5 hours. He produced the same accusations against me as he had done previously. I directed the attention of comrade Kim Il Sung to the fact that only Soviet Koreans are being discussed, then what of the mistakes made by local functionaries about which there is no mention anywhere. Furthermore, it has already been over two months that the Party leadership and all local organizations have discussed the activities and mistakes of the Soviet Koreans, distracting us from our primary duties.

Comrade Kim Il Sung argued with me for a long time. Later he invited comrades Pak Chong-ae and Kim Il. He asked their thoughts on the question under discussion. They essentially agreed with me and Kim Il Sung agreed with us that all of this needed to stop. He asked me to both forget everything and continue to work actively in the post of deputy premier and head of the State Planning Committee.

However, on 18 January I was once again summoned to a meeting of the Presidium of the CC KWP where I was asked to read a draft decision of the Presidium that had already been accepted by the Political Council. Comrade Kim Il Sung suggested that I express my opinion about the matter under discussion to all members of the Presidium. None of the members of the Presidium demonstrated that Pak Yong-bin and I had carried out factional anti-Party activities against the Party.

In my speech I did not agree with the above-mentioned decision of the Presidium but at the end of the meeting said that they should decide as they wish, and demanded that they relieve me from the duty of head of the State Planning Committee and demote me to ordinary work. I made this declaration because I was so worn out that I could no longer explain to the Political Council and comrade Kim Il Sung the incorrectness of the line of accusations made against me and other Soviet Koreans.

Kim Il Sung came out against my suggestion. On another day I once again asked to be relieved from all of my posts. Comrade Kim Il Sung considered my request as unwillingness to agree with the decision of the CC Presidium. I twice raised the matter of being dismissed. The Political Council accepted my suggestion and released me from the posts I had occupied.

Pak explained that I once again asked comrade Kim Il Sung to send me to common work but he categorically opposed such a suggestion.

Later Pak indicated that comrade Kim Il Sung would soon become convinced of the incorrectness of several accusations produced against me, comrade Pak Yong-bin, and other Soviet Koreans. He would also be convinced of what a few members of the Political Council are attempting to achieve through the removal of them/him, Pak Chang-ok and Pak Yong-bin, from the CC and Cabinet of Ministers.

A number of functionaries who presently surround Kim Il Sung, Pak said, meaning Choe Yong-gon, Pak Kum-chul and several deputy directors of the CC KWP, are unqualified and more importantly are mean-spirited and un-objective workers.

Two days ago, Pak said, I was asked to visit comrade Kim Il Sung. All of the directors of the departments of the CC were with him. Before them he assigned me the task of editing a section of a speech on industry to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Congress of the KWP. He ordered all with materials about the work of industry to deliver them to me. However,

up to now they have not given me anything. I informed comrade Kim Il Sung of this. He promised to take measures.

I directed Pak Chang-ok's attention to the address of comrade Kim Il Sung in relation to the fact that he, Pak Chang-ok, was on more than one occasion ordered to speak with criticism of his erroneous actions. Pak responded that no one had ever given him such an order. During a conversation in October of last year comrade Kim Il Sung drew attention to the fact that I had to deliver a speech on the work of the union of writers of Korea. I answered him that I am entirely unfamiliar with the literature of Korean writers. On that, the conversation ceased.

I asked comrade Pak Chang-ok to describe how the party functionaries in the CC KWP and the Cabinet of Ministers study the decision of the 20<sup>th</sup> CPSU Party Congress, the speech of comrades N.S. Khrushchev and N.A. Bulganin, and what influence and impressions they got from the 20<sup>th</sup> CPSU Party Congress.

Pak answered that the majority of party functionaries were still silent. They are waiting until comrade Kim Il Sung himself talks about the line of issues, and especially about the personality cult, collective leadership, observance of inter-party democracy, revolutionary legality, etc. All of these questions are of supreme importance to the future work and strengthening of our Party.

The praise of comrade Kim Il Sung is especially widespread in both oral and print propaganda in Korea and if anyone comments on this matter, they are subject to punishment. I must acknowledge that what we members of the Political Council did in our attempt to come out against this was feeble and timid. Since Pak Yong-bin recently left the CC Department of Propaganda and Agitation, the praise of comrade Kim Il Sung has only increased, with members of the Political Council "competing" in this action, attempting to outdo one another. Comrade Kim Il Sung sees all of this and strongly encourages it. At his request and in consultation with him preparations are being made for a film about his struggle against the Japanese colonizers. The study of the history of the KWP is conducted through the reports and speeches of comrade Kim Il Sung. It would be possible to give even more examples characterizing just how far the matter of praising comrade Kim Il Sung has gone.

The leading members of the Party, Comrade Pak said, at the present moment are studying the decision and materials of the CPSU Twentieth Party Congress; discussions are taking place everywhere on the question of the personality cult, and I don't doubt that the majority of the leading cadres correctly understand all of the matters and attitudes advanced in the decision of the Twentieth Party Congress and reach the necessary conclusions. I also think, he continued, that comrade Kim Il Sung will largely change the forms and methods of leadership. Without that, the further strengthening of the Party and reinforcement of its influence on the masses is inconceivable.

At the end of our discussion, comrade Pak Chang-ok informed me that he had a hand in the composition of the unforgettable letter which Choe Yong-gon delivered to the Soviet government in February of this year. In this note, the Korean government asks the government of the USSR about the deferment and partially about forgiving the advanced payments on credit the Soviet Union had previously given to Korea.

Furthermore we discussed the question of approaching the Soviet government with a request to render the DPRK further material assistance. We think, said Pak, that it is necessary for you during the upcoming five year plan to receive material assistance in the amount of one billion rubles; we assume that this assistance will be rendered in roughly equal portions by the Soviet Union and China.

During a meeting of the Political Council, Comrade Kim Il Sung said on this matter that it is not necessary to appeal to the Soviet government now with the simultaneous requests for the deferment and partial forgiveness of the advanced payments on credit and additional material assistance. It is necessary to decide, he said, first the primary question – the matter of the deferment and partial writing off of the advanced payments on credit. If the Soviet government complies with our request, then after some time we will appeal to the government of the USSR for additional material assistance. Members of the Political Council agreed with comrade Kim Il Sung's suggestion.

I thanked comrade Pak Chang-ok for the information.

The meeting lasted for 4 hours.

Comments:



1. From the meetings conducted with Soviet Korean comrades Pak Chang-ok, Pak Yong-bin, Pak Ui-wan, Kim Sung-hwa, Kim Dae-wook, Chang Dong-hok, and others, it is clear that comrade Pak Chang-ok, much like comrades Pak Yong-bin, Ki Sek-bok, Chang Yul, and Chang Dong-hok admitted to the fabricated charges made against them at the meeting of the Presidium of the CC KWP on 18 January on the grounds [that were put forth in] the decree passed by the Presidium of the CC KWP “About the Future Struggle Against Reactionary Bourgeois Ideology in Literature and Art.”

It is necessary to consider that for over two months the CC KWP discussed the matter in plenary sessions of the Presidium and Political Council of the CC and also in primary party organizations. The discussion of this matter, in point of fact, turned into a discussion of the activities of a number of leading Soviet Koreans. What’s more, coercive methods were employed in the discussions, creating an entirely incorrect public impression surrounding the Soviet Koreans. All of this led to the above-mentioned officials admitting to the accusations made against them.

2. For the past while, comrades Pak Chang-ok and Pak Yong-bin tried to sort out the essence of the question under discussion and visited the embassy with the aim of explaining their thoughts on the well known decree of the Presidium of the CC KWP from 18 January of this year. In the conversations they denied their participation in factional and anti-Party activities, and moreover in distorting the policies of the Party in the realm of literature, art and the United National Front of Korea.

In altering their thoughts on the well known decree of the Presidium of the CC KWP, in my opinion, there were two influential factors: the historical decision of the CPSU Twentieth Party Congress and the change in the relations of the Political Council and Comrade Kim Il Sung himself in connection with comrades Pak Chang-ok and Pak Yong-bin and other Soviet Koreans. It is well known that the Political Council repeatedly gave the order to provincial and city committees of the Party to cease discussion of the activities of famous Soviet Koreans.

3. I think that the abovementioned Soviet Koreans made a number of serious mistakes. First of all they incorrectly and arrogantly associated with the local cadres, ignored them, and did not advance to leadership posts. Several functionaries such as Han Sol-ya and others were victimized.

However, in my opinion, one can not accept the correctness of the decree of the Presidium of the CC KWP from 18 January 1956 in that Comrades Pak Chang-ok, Pak Yong-bin, Ki Sek-bok, Chang Yul, and Chang Dong-hok carried out a factional anti-Party struggle against the Party and distorted Party policies in the realm of literature and art.

Counselor of the Embassy

20 March 1956

S. Filatov

## **DOCUMENT No. 2**

### **Memorandum of Conversation with the head of the department of construction materials under the DPRK Cabinet of Ministers, Yi Pil-gyu, 20 July 1956.**

*[Source: RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 304-308. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by James F. Person.]*

From the diary of  
Charge d' Affairs ad interim  
USSR in the DPRK  
Petrov A.M.

Top Secret

#### MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION WITH THE HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS UNDER THE CABINET OF MINISTERS, YI PIL-GYU

20 July 1956

The meeting took place in the Embassy at the initiative of Yi Pil-gyu. At the beginning of the discussion Yi explained the following about himself.

From the age of 16 he took part in the revolutionary movement in China. Later, he illegally came to Korea where he continued his underground revolutionary work. When in his twenties, he was arrested by Japanese gendarmes and sat in prison for 12 years.

After the liberation of Korea by the Soviet Army he worked as the head of the department of state security under the Soviet military administration. During the period from 1948 to 1950 he studied in the Party College under the CC CPSU. After returning from Moscow he worked as the deputy director of the General Staff of the Korean

People's Army, and later commanded the 6<sup>th</sup> Army. From the army he was sent to the Ministry of the Interior in the capacity of first deputy minister. At one time he carried out the duties of the Minister of the Interior. He worked for a long time with Pak Il-u and knows him well.

Further, Yi Pil-gyu said that in connection with the Pak Il-u affair, he was 'sacked' from the organs of the Ministry of the Interior and sent to the Ministry of Chemical Industry as the head of administration, and later as deputy minister.

At the present moment he was working as the head of the department of construction materials.

Yi claimed that he wanted to express candidly his thoughts on the leadership of the KWP and government, i.e. Kim Il Sung.

Yi said that he did not learn about Kim Il Sung only until the 1930s when he, Yi, was in prison. Yi, emphasized with much indignation that at the present moment, the history of the struggle of the Korean people for their liberation was being distorted. Yi claimed that at the present moment the staging of an opera called 'solgaegol' was under way in which one part showed the liberation of political prisoners by the partisan army. This, according to Yi, contradicted reality. The Soviet Army freed political prisoners. Further, Yi declared that it is being legitimized at the present moment that allegedly, 'Gwangbokhe' (the Society for the Restoration of the Homeland) was in fact an early form of the Communist Party of Korea. Supposedly this was completely untrue. That was a falsification of history. 'Gwangbokhe' was a society of the democratic front. It is Yi's opinion that the revolutionaries located in Korea worked completely independently, without the influence of Koreans located during that period in China. He said that right up to 1936 the Comintern, Kim, and the Profintern directly sent people and directives to Korea. In his opinion, if 'Gwangbokhe,' organized by Kim Il Sung, a member at that time of the Chinese Communist Party, really played a large role in the revolutionary movement in Korea, then the Comintern should have concerned itself with that organization through the Communist Party of China. But that just didn't happen.

Further, Yi touched on the problem of the personality cult of Kim Il Sung.

Yi P'il-gyu said that the personality cult of Kim Il Sung took on an intolerable character. He did not tolerate any criticism or self-criticism. The word of Kim Il Sung

was law. He had surrounded himself with sycophants and lackeys in the Central Committee and Council of Ministers. It would be enough to say that of 18 ministers, 9 of them have a shadowy past. To this number is related, according to Yi, the Minister of Metallurgical Industry, Kang Young-chan, the Minister of Light Industry, Mun Man-ok, the Minister of Chemical Industry, Yi Chang-ho, Chairman of the State Planning Committee, Yi Chang-ok, Minister of Education, Han Sol-ya, and others. To the Korean people, nothing was known of their struggle in the past for freedom and the independence of Korea. Yi Pil-gyu said further that at the present moment an extraordinarily difficult atmosphere had been created. The CC was spreading distrust between functionaries. Functionaries followed one another. There was absolutely no trust and friendship between functionaries in the CC KWP and Council of Ministers. In his opinion, a group of officials consider it necessary to undertake certain actions against Kim Il Sung and his closest associates at the earliest possible opportunity.

In response to my question about what exactly those actions would consist of, Yi answered that the group set before itself the task of replacing the present leadership of the CC WPK and government. In his opinion, there were two ways of doing this. The first way – that is sharp and decisive criticism within the Party and self-criticism. However, Yi said, Kim Il Sung would likely not be in favor of that way and he doubted the success of such an approach. The second way was forcible upheaval. That was a difficult path, Yi said, involving sacrifice. In the DPRK there were such people who can embark on that course and who were currently making appropriate preparations.

To my question if he could name any from that group, Yi evaded answering.

I asked him, in his opinion, who from among the leadership respectfully displayed himself in work. Yi gave the names of Choe Yong-gon and Choe Chang-ik.

Choe Yong-gon, Yi said, had recently demonstrated dissatisfaction with the activities of Kim Il Sung. Choe Chang-ik – a person with an impressive revolutionary past. If a struggle with Kim Il Sung began, then he would stand on the side of his opponents.

To my question what position Yi took in connection to the above-mentioned underground group, Yi again evaded answering, but from the tone of his comments, I have surmised that he plays a significant role in that group.

I asked Yi what the objective of that information was and he answered that it comes from the desire to alert the Soviet embassy to the fact that there was a possibility of one or another development taking place in the DPRK.

Regarding the life of the masses, Yi explained that 80% of the population of Korea consisted of peasants. After the liberation of Korea, peasants were given everything possible for a better life, but they lived very badly. The government carried out improper fiscal policy. Instead of 23-27%, more than 50% of tax in kind had been practically seized from the peasants. At present, this policy was continuing. There was nothing to say about the methods of collecting tax in kind in 1954-1955. The collection was accompanied by beatings, murder, and repression. On the spot party work was based not on persuasion, but on violence, the cooperative movement occurred on the basis of violence. Workers lived very poorly; there was not enough cereal and soy. The intelligentsia and students lived under very difficult conditions. In the opinion of Yi Pil-gyu, the Party had to admit sincerely its mistakes in front of the peasant masses; honestly tell them that times are very tough. At the same time [it should] tell them about the prospective future. At the present moment they wrote in the newspapers and announced on the radio only one laudatory remark; that everything was fine in the DPRK. That was an improper method of operating.

Regarding individual members of the Party leadership and government, Yi Pil-gyu said: Kim Tu-bong was not a Communist before and the Chinese Communist Party did not pay much attention to him. In general he was very quiet, industrious, but aware of his position. He would not blindly follow Kim Il Sung.

Choe Yong-gon was not with Kim Il Sung. They were together only in the USSR. Choe Yong-gon had a brilliant revolutionary record. By rank he was higher than Kim Il Sung. Choe Yong-gon was a person with his own intelligence. He had recently demonstrated dissatisfaction with several of Kim Il Sung's activities.

Kim Il – Kim Il Sung's protégé. He will always side with Kim Il Sung.

Pak Kum-ch'ol – he was a young worker. It would not be worth promoting him too high at all.

Pak Chong-ae – she would be content with the present situation since she was afraid of her past. Many have doubts as to why the Japanese allowed a person who

graduated from a Communist college in the Soviet Union to be left in peace. This means that she pledged to the Japanese not to become engaged in revolutionary activities.

Choe Chang-ik – a person with a revolutionary past and independent wit. If a struggle against Kim Il Sung ensued, he would come to the side of Kim Il Sung’s opponents.

Pak Chang-ok – he still had a lot to do to make up for his faults. He was the very first to name Kim Il Sung irreplaceable, praising him to high heaven. He was the founder of the personality cult of Kim Il Sung.

Pak Ui-wan – a good person. He possessed good qualities in his work, had authority among the leading functionaries.

Kim Chang-man – he was the most hateful person. He persistently demanded shooting Pak Il-u.

Han Sol-ya – he should be shot. He should be put away for his one book “History.” He was a very ghastly, injurious man. A Kim Il Sung sycophant.

Yi requested that I consider the contents of our conversation strictly confidential and not, under any conditions, inform the Korean leadership of them.

The discussion lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes. The translator of the discussion was the embassy interpreter, Kim Dyu-bong.

Charge d’ Affairs ad interim  
USSR in the DPRK

/Petrov A.M./

### **DOCUMENT No. 3**

#### **Memorandum of Conversation with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK, Nam Il, 24 July 1956**

*[Source: RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 301-303. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by James F. Person.]*

From the diary of  
Charge d’ Affairs ad interim  
USSR in the DPRK  
Petrov A.M.

Top Secret

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION  
WITH MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE DPRK NAM IL

24 July 1956

I met with Nam Il at his suggestion, who in the meeting explained that on the very first day after the return of the government delegation to the DPRK, i.e. 20 July, he met in his apartment with Pak Chan-ok who before that had never visited him at his apartment.

Pak told Nam Il that a group of leading functionaries, including Choe Chang-ik, Kim Sung-hwa and a number of others were prepared to speak out with severe criticism of Kim Il Sung at the coming plenum of the Central Committee. The main issues of criticism would be the erroneous methods of leadership of the CC KWP and of Kim Il Sung personally, Kim Il Sung's personality cult, incorrect dealings with the Soviet Koreans, and other issues in Party and state life. Pak expressed confidence that if he himself, and also if Choe Chang-ik and Kim Sung-hwa spoke out with that criticism, then he would receive support from individual members of the Presidium and also from several heads of local Party organizations. Pak said that it would be desirable for Nam Il to join that group and speak out with sharp criticism of Kim Il Sung at the Presidium of the CC KWP and at the Plenum of the CC. The possibility of Choe Yong-gon taking part in the criticism of Kim Il Sung had not been ruled out.

In connection with that, Nam Il, in his own words, wanted to seek advice on what position he should take. He thought that serious criticism of Kim Il Sung from Pak Chang-ok and others would be improper. Such a sharp propounding of the problem of the personality cult in the Korean context as Pak Chang-ok and others are preparing to do would lead to undesirable consequences. It might undermine the authority of the existing leadership of the Party and government, discredit Kim Il Sung in the eyes of the Party masses and the entire nation, and stimulate considerable discussion within the Party.

Further, Nam Il noted that the observations of the CC KWP about several shortcomings and mistakes in the work of the KWP were correctly and frankly perceived by Kim Il Sung. Kim Il Sung told Nam Il and several other members of the government delegation that he would take measures in order to completely and fully amend these errors and shortcomings, including the issue of the cult of personality. In the opinion of

Kim Il Sung, these shortcomings and errors would not be eliminated immediately, not by discussing these issues in a full-scale investigation in the Plenums of the CC or in meetings of Party organs, but little by little without involving the entire Party in the discussion of these issues.

He, Nam Il, and additional members of the Presidium rendered Kim Il Sung all kinds of assistance in eliminating all made errors and deficiencies and took measures so as to regularly prompt Kim Il Sung to rectify them effectively and quickly. Nam Il stressed that in spite of all of Kim Il Sung's shortcomings and mistakes, there was nobody in the DPRK who could replace him, Kim Il Sung was always quite correct in relation to Marxism-Leninism, the general line of the Central Committee of the KWP was correct, and Kim Il Sung personally, although a bit distressed, correctly perceived the criticisms directed at him by the leadership of the CC CPSU.

In connection with the visit of Pak Chang-ok, he, Nam Il, felt himself in a very awkward position. On the one hand, he should, as a member of the Presidium of the Central Committee, inform Kim Il Sung about the conversation that took place with Pak Chang-ok and identify him as one of those actively preparing to speak out against Kim Il Sung, while on the other hand, since Pak Chang-ok was a Soviet Korean he would not like to inform Kim Il Sung, since he, Kim Il Sung, might improperly connect the demonstration against him with the Soviet Koreans.

I expressed my personal feelings that the danger of Nam Il in connection with the severe criticism of Kim Il Sung deserved a great deal of attention, that the position taken by Pak Chang-ok on that issue was clearly incorrect, that the initiative of severe criticism of Kim Il Sung from the Soviet Koreans might be interpreted incorrectly and it might cause an undesired reaction both inside the country and on the international arena. I said that he should in some way influence Pak Chang-ok, Kim Sung-hwa and other Soviet Koreans so that they rejected the initiative to speak out against Kim Il Sung.

Regarding the question of Nam Il informing Kim Il Sung about the above-mentioned conversation with Pak Chang-ok, that, as I explained, was his own business, but that it would be expedient to refrain for now from naming Pak Chang-ok and Kim Sung-hwa.



Nam Il agreed with me. He thinks that it would be good to warn Kim Il Sung and the Presidium of the Central Committee now so that Kim Il Sung would speak critically of himself at the Plenum in connection with his report about the results of the trip of the government delegation to the USSR and People's Republics.

Nam Il again stressed that he and other members of the Presidium would help Kim Il Sung in every possible way to prepare a speech containing self-criticism. The discussion lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes.

Charge d' Affairs ad interim  
USSR in the DPRK

/A Petrov/

31.VII.56

## **DOCUMENT No. 4**

### **Memorandum of Conversation with Premier Kim Il Sung, 1 September 1956**

*[Source: RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, List 319. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by James F. Person.]*

From the diary of  
The Ambassador of the USSR in the DPRK  
Comrade Ivanov V.I.  
29 August – 14 September

1 September 1956

#### MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION WITH KIM IL SUNG

...At the plenum, following [Kim's] address, the issue of Yun Kong-hum arose, who, in his speech made accusations that the Workers Party rejected the decree of the Twentieth Party Congress, did not follow the principles of Marxism-Leninism, painting the matter in such a manner that inside the KWP very serious consequences of the personality cult were being preserved. He rejected the general line of the party.

According to Kim, the participants of the plenum were outraged by the antagonistic manner of Yun's speech at the plenum and demanded that he be prevented from speaking. Choe Chang-ik supported Yun. Others who spoke revealed the anti-party

character of Yun's speech at the plenum and cited facts of his anti-party activities leading up to the plenum.

Alongside Yun, undercover anti-party activities were carried out by So-hwi, Yi Pil-gyu and the deputy minister of culture, Kim Chang-il, who, according to Kim, fled the plenum and crossed the border. They were held at the present moment by Chinese border guards and are located in Andun.

For their anti-Party activities So-hwi, Yi Pil-gyu and Kim Chang-il were expelled from the party. Choe Chang-ik was removed from the Presidium of the CC. Pak Chang-ok was removed from the post of Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and removed from the ranks of the CC. The issue had been referred to a Party Commission of the CC. At that, Kim explained that the party leadership would not have intentionally applied such measures in relation to Choe Chang-ik and Pak Chang-ok. However, the participants of the Plenum, after learning about their anti-Party activities, demanded taking them in relation to those functionaries as an organized conclusion...

## **DOCUMENT No. 5**

### **Memorandum of Conversation with ambassador of the Peoples' Republic of China to the DPRK, Qiao Xiao Guang, 4 September 1956.**

*[Source: RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 322-325. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by James F. Person.]*

From the Diary of the Ambassador of the USSR in the DPRK,  
Comrade Ivanov V.I.  
29 August – 14 September

4 September 1956

During a reception on 2 September organized by the Vietnamese Embassy in the DPRK on the occasion of the 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the declaration of the Republic, I approached the ambassador of the PRC in the DPRK, Qiao Xiao Guang, with a request to meet for a discussion. The meeting took place on 4 September at the Embassy.

Qiao said that he came to share his thoughts on two issues. Regarding the issue of the PRC providing further support to the DPRK, he said that on 21 August of this year Kim Il Sung told him in a conversation that the Korean government could not

accommodate the material needs of the people in the new Five-Year Plan and requested further support from the PRC. Concrete figures of the amount of support that the Korean friends would like to receive from the PRC in the coming Five-Year Plan were not mentioned in the discussion. However, while specifying the plan for trade between the two countries for 1957 it became known that the aggregate output of supplies to the DPRK from the PRC in 1957 must consist of 185 million yuan, of which 85 million should be used to cover commodity circulation, 50 million to [cover] the expense of remaining unpaid labor and the government of the PRC requested to allot 50 million Yuan.

Qiao said that the question that was advanced by the Korean side with regard to additional assistance was transmitted to the government [in Beijing] and that he had still not received an answer.

Coming to the second issue, Qiao told me that during the work of the Plenum of the CC KWP, an extremely serious event occurred concerning the relations between the DPRK and the PRC. On 3 September the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK, Yi Dong-gon, explained that on the night of 30-31 August of this year, four Korean citizens: Minister of Trade Yun Kong-hum; Chairman of the CC of United Unions So Hwi; Deputy Minister of Culture Kim Chang-il; and the Head of the Department of Construction Materials, Yi Pil-gyu, crossed the Korean – Chinese border in the region of Andun and were detained by Chinese border guards. Yi Dong-gon lodged a petition by the Korean government about returning the guilty individuals to the DPRK.

Qiao said the government of the PRC was immediately informed about what had occurred. Korean border guards urged the above-mentioned individuals to return to the DPRK; however, they all categorically refused.

In response to the request of the Korean government it was announced that the noted individuals were not simple border crossers and that their forcible return was impossible.

At the same time, Qiao said that on 1 September he was invited by Choe Yong-gon and Kim Chang-man, who told him about the course of events at the plenum. Minister of Trade Yun Kong-hum spoke during the discussion on Kim Il Sung's address.

His speech contained malicious and libelous attacks on the leadership of the KWP. He accused the leadership of the KWP of poorly putting into practice the decree of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the CPSU about the personality cult. As a result the leadership of the KWP had supposedly committed serious mistakes, conveying in the absence of democracy within the party incorrect distribution of cadres, and displaying incompetence in handling the difficult welfare situation of the Korean people. Yun's speech was cut short, and after lunch, he, together with the three other above-mentioned individuals did not show up at the meeting. As has become known, they ran away to China. At the demand of the participants, Yun was expelled from the ranks of the party.

Qiao also told me that he was informed that the anti-party activities of the above-mentioned individuals were noticed before the departure of the government delegation to the people's democratic republics. However, they became more obvious during Kim Il Sung's absence. Before the plenum, Kim Kwan traveled several times to the town of Haeju supposedly to prepare for an escape to South Korea. After being convinced that it would be difficult to carry out, however, he fled to China.

Qiao asked what my thoughts were on the course of the work of the plenum as well as on the four individuals.

In response, I informed Qiao that Korean functionaries shared several aspects of the work of the plenum in talks. They said that even before the opening of the plenum, So Hwi and other individuals spoke with a series of rather serious accusations directed at the CC KWP and in particular about the issue of cadres. However, all of these issues were touched upon in the address of Kim Il Sung and approved by all members of the Presidium. Nonetheless, at the Plenum these issues were once again raised. Yun Kong-hum raised the issues about which Qiao spoke.

Choe Yong-gon and Kim Chang-man also informed him that several disgruntled functionaries who visited the Soviet embassy claimed that the CC of the CPSU sent a special official to the Soviet embassy who was entrusted with the task of investigating the status of overcoming the personality cult in the KWP. At the beginning of the conversation the incorrectness of such a message was explained to Qiao and that it had also been told to the Charge d'Affaires by the Korean leadership, with which it agreed.

Concerning the course of the work of the Plenum and answering Qiao's question about my thoughts on all of the incidents, I said that the issues which arose in the KWP were serious and were not stimulated by any outside factors, Soviet or Chinese, but were a domestic process taking place within the KWP.

Qiao expressed total agreement with the observations I made, at the same time asking a second time about my thoughts on the individuals who fled to the PRC. I commented that since the named individuals were located in the PRC, the Chinese side is apparently more aware of their reason for leaving. I added that I did not know those individuals personally and did not yet have anything to say about the reason for their fleeing. I also knew that the Korean government accuses them not only of anti-party activities, but also of disrupting work, of amoral crimes and of the embezzlement of state funds.

Qiao commented that from the moment of his coming to the DPRK he had meetings with So Hwi and Yun Kong-hun and added that he was also aware that the embezzlement of about one million won has been attributed to Yun Kong-hun and others.

The meeting was attended by and translated by Attaché Kurbatskii M.N. and translator Wang Bao-min.

## **DOCUMENT No. 6**

### **Report by N.T. Fedorenko on a conversation with Yi Sang-jo, Ambassador of the DPRK to the USSR, 5 September 1956**

*[Source: RGANI, Delo 5, Opis 28, Delo 412, Listy 224-228. Obtained for CWIHP by Nobuo Shimotomai and translated for CWIHP by Gary Goldberg.]*

[Stamp:  
CC CPSU  
32165  
[11 Sep 56]  
subject to return to  
the CC CPSU General Department]

FROM THE JOURNAL OF  
N. T. FEDORENKO

Top Secret Copy N° 10  
5 September 1956  
N° 134/nf

[Handwritten at the bottom of the first page: “To the archives. The letter of Yi Sang-jo was distributed to members of the CC CPSU Presidium. See of 6 and 15 September 1956 [[SIC, a caret at the bottom of the reproduced page suggests that a document reference was inserted at this point]] for the decision on the question of the situation in the DPRK] [signatures and dates are off the reproduced page].

## RECEPTION

of YI SANG-JO, Ambassador of the DPRK to the USSR

5 September 1956

[handwritten in the left margin:  
“To Com. Ponomarev; [M. Suslov]”

I received Yi Sang-jo at his request.

1. Yi Sang-jo made a request to pass to N. S. Khrushchev his personal written statement about the situation in the KWP in connection with the plenum that was held. Yi Sang-jo added at the same time that if N. S. Khrushchev was not in Moscow, he asked that this statement be passed to A[nastas]. I. Mikoyan.

Having noted that the statement he delivered contained a request for N. S. Khrushchev or A. I. Mikoyan to receive him, Yi Sang-jo said that in the event such a conversation took place CC KWP member Kim Sung-hwa, who had come to Moscow to study at the Higher Party School, could serve as interpreter.

Yi Sang-jo expressed the hope that the CC CPSU and CC CCP [Communist Party of China] would help the Workers Party of Korea in the difficult situation that had arisen as a result of the hasty and unjustified repressions committed by the CC KWP leadership against comrades who expressed criticism.

2. Yi Sang-jo asked whether it was true that the CC CPSU had sent instructions to Nam Il via Ambassador Com. Ivanov forbidding criticism of Kim Il Sung in view of the fact that this would damage the authority of Kim Il Sung and indicate criticism of the political line of the KWP. In reply to my question as to where and when Nam Il spoke about such instructions, Yi Sang-jo replied that Nam Il referred to the existence of these instructions at Presidium meetings and at the CC KWP Plenum.

Yi Sang-jo replied that he personally knew nothing about such CC CPSU instructions.

3. Yi Sang-jo repeated with indignation that Nam Il and Pak Chong-ae deceitfully used the name of the CC CPSU in order to help Kim Il Sung and Choe Yong-gon take revenge on the comrades who criticized the leadership of the CC KWP.

He added that a situation of threats and terror had been created in the Party. For example, Kim Il Sung told Pak Ui-wan that he had many compromising materials against him, Pak Ui-wan, about the squandering of government resources, and threatened to circulate these materials if Pak Ui-wan criticized the KWP leadership.

4. Yi Sang-jo told how he had heard that it was admitted at the CC KWP Plenum that many displays of the cult of personality had occurred in propaganda but at the same time Kim Il Sung and Choe Yong-gon declared that there were no harmful consequences of the cult of personality in Korea. Such a statement was sharply contradicted by the facts, Yi Sang-jo pointed out. For example, people were arrested in the DPRK for printing portraits of Kim Il Sung on insufficiently good paper or carelessly, and there were cases of an arrest of a person for wrapping a book in a newspaper containing a portrait of Kim Il Sung. Several thousand people had been arrested for things of a similar nature.

All this, Yi Sang-jo stressed, testified to the existence of the most negative consequences of the cult of personality in the DPRK.

5. Yi Sang-jo then said that he had received a second summons to Pyongyang and obviously he would have to go there for some time. Meanwhile, he had informed the DPRK MID that he was ill. Yi Sang-jo added that had still not decided about the question of visiting China for some time. He did not explain how the Chinese comrades would view such a request by him. Yi Sang-jo added that he had decided to return to the DPRK although he knows that reprisals await him there. Kim Il Sung, in Yi Sang-jo's words, has given instructions that any citizen might given any punishment for any deed on the testimony of two witnesses, even so far as execution.

In reply to my question about the possible date of his return, Yi Sang-jo said that he intended to wait until the CC CPSU's attitude toward his statement was clear.

B. N. Vereshchagin, adviser to the DVO, was present at the conversation.

Attachment: copy of Yi Sang-jo's letter to Com. N. S. Khrushchev.

DEPUTY USSR MINISTER  
OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

/N. FEDORENKO/

[signature]

30 copies were issued/ng  
N° 286-nf  
5.IX.56

Dear Comrade N. S. KHRUSHCHEV!

I hope you have received a report from Pyongyang in which you were informed of those serious events that are occurring in the Workers Party of Korea. You probably well know that our party has committed serious mistakes and blunders in its activity. Therefore, some comrades pointed out his shortcomings to Cde. Kim Il Sung in the form of comradely criticism in order to eliminate the mistakes and shortcomings. He was also subjected to comradely criticism at the CC Presidium meeting. However, he did not take the opinions of the comrades into consideration. Then this issue was raised at the CC Plenum held on 30 August, at which severe party criticism developed.

The substance of the criticism at the plenum comes down to the following:

The cult of personality in our party was subjected to criticism at the plenum in order to overcome the consequences of the cult of personality of Kim Il Sung.

Those sycophants and careerists who spread the cult of personality in every way were subjected [to criticism] at the Plenum. Workers on the ideological front who falsified the history of our party under the influence of the cult of personality were also subjected to criticism at the plenum. The comrades who were critical at the Plenum pursued only one goal: to eliminate the serious consequences of the cult of personality in our Party and completely ensure intra-party democracy and collective leadership in complete accordance with the Charter of our Party.

However, the comrades who were in power took revenge on those who courageously and in a party way offered criticism directed at the elimination of the consequences of the cult of personality and the elimination of the serious shortcomings in our party.

Several CC members, including CC Presidium members who had a wealth of experience in revolutionary struggle, were unjustifiably expelled from the party. These events created a serious and complex situation inside the party.

In those conditions where intra-party democracy is not being ensured, it has become impossible not only to eliminate the shortcomings in the party through internal strength but also [has become] impossible to prevent events that very negatively reflect on the activity of the party.

In connection with the above I submit my personal recommendations to the CC CPSU, which I request be seriously considered. Please send a senior official of the CC CPSU to Korea to convene a CC Plenum of the [Korean] Workers Party at which all members of the CC should be present, including those who were expelled. The intra-party situation is to be studied at such a plenum more deeply and comprehensively and specific steps worked out directed at removing the shortcomings in our party.

If such a possibility is precluded, then please invite to Moscow senior representatives of the CC of the [Korean] Workers Party and those comrades who were



expelled, who will examine the current situation in the Workers Party together with members of the CC CPSU Presidium and will work out specific steps to remove the shortcomings in the Party.

If this possibility, too, is precluded, then please send a written appeal to the CC of the Workers Party of Korea in the name of the CC CPSU that would describe the substance of the issue. Such a comradely comment would be more effective if the CC of the Chinese Communist Party also were to subscribe to it.

If these steps are possible then please receive me and I will describe the situation in Korea in more detail.

/YI SANG-JO/

3.IX.56

## **DOCUMENT No. 7**

### **Memorandum of Conversation with Deputy Premier, Pak Ui-wan, 6 September 1956.**

*[Source: RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 327-332. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by James F. Person.]*

From the diary of  
The Ambassador of the USSR in the DPRK  
Comrade Ivanov V.I.  
29 August – 14 September

6 September 1956

Pak Ui-wan told me the following about the work of the Plenum of the CC KWP:

In Kim Il Sung' address, the problem of the personality cult was touched upon only in connection with the status of work in the area of propaganda. It was mentioned by Pak that both with and without any reason, many shouted "hurray" to the leader and also glorified him in various textbooks and literature.

In the discussion on the address, the first to speak was the Chairman of the State Planning Committee Yi Dong-ok, who, in a sycophantic tone, spoke about the massive feats achieved in the DPRK.

The second to speak was the secretary of the provincial committee of the Party from the province of Northern Hamgyong, Kim Dae-gong. He also talked about the

successes achieved in the provinces under the leadership of the KWP. It merits mentioning the fact that in his speech he singled out and sharply criticized the work of the Ministry of Trade and the activities of the unions. It was clear that the speech was prepared well in advance.

The third to speak was the Minister of Trade, Yun Kong-hun who heatedly, in a harsh tone said that the spirit of the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU was absent from the Third Party Congress of the KWP. Kim Il Sung immediately cut him off, accusing him of slandering the Party. Continuing, Yun said that the CC of the KWP does not put the ideas of Marxism-Leninism into practice with integrity and dedication. From the Presidium came remarks such as “what are you slandering” and “is the KWP a fascist or bourgeois Party.”

Further, Yun said that Choe Yong-gon is the leader of another Party and was immediately named to the post of deputy chairman of the KWP, a clear violation of Party democracy. At that point Choe Yong-gon stood and called Yun a dog and insulted him in every manner.

Choe Chang-ik came forward to the defense of Yun, however, as everything was prepared to finish off Yun, Choe Chang-ik could not speak, not being permitted to talk.

At the evening session the Minister of Finance, Yi Dyu-yong, spoke. He illuminated the victory and success attained thanks to the policies of the Workers Party. In particular, he said that there is not one country in the socialist camp other than the DPRK that could raise the wages of workers by 35% at once. Regarding Yun’s speech, he said that the statement deviated and was factionist and characterized him as counterrevolutionary and anti-party.

The next to speak was Nam Il. He spoke in general phrases, simply pointing out the truth that unfortunately the decree of the March Plenum of the CC, where Kim Il Sung talked about the personality cult, was not brought to the attention of the members of the party. Repeating the well known party slogans about the need to expand party democracy and struggle with the personality cult, he didn’t say anything of substance on that issue in the KWP. At the same time, disparaged Yun with crushing criticism.

The chairman of the CC of the Union of Democratic Youth, Pak Yong-guk spoke for a very long time, stating that the Third Party Congress of the KWP, guided by the

decree of the Twentieth Party Congress, successively put into effect the principles of Marxism-Leninism. He stressed that the personality cult was spread and supported not by Kim Il Sung, but by Pak Hon-yong who was practically compared with God. He also said that there was no need to be critical. Talking about democratic perversions inside the party, he pointed out that they are the legacy of Ho Ka-I [Hegai] and do not pertain to the practical work of Kim Il Sung. He characterized Yun's speech as counterrevolutionary, directed against the existing state structure, and suggested removing Yun from the ranks of the CC, expelling him from the party and putting him on trial.

In the speech of Choe Chang-ik there was nothing bad. He pointed out that the policies of the party were correct, but that it is necessary to talk about the personality cult, a sore issue for the party. He also pointed out that the CC KWP made individual errors in its work. He was given a large number of questions, from which it became clear that he subscribes to the ideology of the factionary group.

The chairman of the party committee of Southern P'yongan, Kim Man-gum talked about the condition of the economy in the provinces and expressed his full support for the speech of the chairman of the CC of the Union of Democratic Youth.

He also noted that Yun's speech was a planned speech of the anti-party group headed by Choe Chang-ik and that that group should be investigated and all of them jailed.

In his speech Kim Chang-man said that all activities of the leadership of the KWP had been correct. He characterized Yun not only as anti-party, but also as a person who was morally corrupt, who did not eat any other meat than veal, who squandered large sums of money and who was a thief and a swindler.

Speaking next, Kim Il Sung told the history of the rise of discontent with the leadership of the KWP, underlining that Choe Chang-ik and Pak Chang-ok head the group of malcontents. He also said that rumors reached the leadership of the KWP before the meeting that, apparently, a person who led the malcontents and considers the policies of the KWP incorrect was at the Soviet embassy. The leadership of the KWP was obliged to send Pak Chong-ae and Nam Il to the Soviet embassy to clarify the situation. It turned out that those rumors were antagonistic and spread by the anti-party gang.

Following that, a letter of the CPSU arrived in which it was indicated that in individual countries where the problem of the personality cult was being examined, certain individuals took advantage of that, expressing their discontent with the leaders. He did not speak about the inner-Party problems that were coming to a head, but only concentrated on the anti-Party group, making it their aim to overthrow the leadership and seize power in their hands.

The speech of the chairman of the Party Committee of the province of South Hamgyon, Hwang Dong-min, was directed against those who expressed discontent.

The head of the department of propaganda and agitation of the CC KWP, Yi Il-gong, pointed out that the Third Party Congress was completely guided by the ideas of the Twentieth Party Congress and following it, the CC of the KWP in turn resolved the shortcomings connected with the personality cult. Several individuals accused us [the North Koreans] of discontinuing radio programming from the Soviet Union. However, it was well known to all that in those countries, which developed and matured, absolutely nothing was transmitted from the Soviet Union. We also grew, and therefore discontinued broadcasts from the [Soviet] Union.

In his speech Choe Yong-gon pointed out that Yun presented to the Plenum a concentrated program against the party and government. In a truncated form, the factionaries presented to the plenum all issues of the Party: its history; the issues of the economic condition of the country; the personality cult and the placement of cadres. The factional activities of those individuals are a continuation of the principal work of the group of Pak Il-u. Choe Yong-gon pointed out that it was Yun Kong-hum, Choe Chang-ik and others that mounted the campaign against the Soviet Koreans, starting to lash out at them. They prepared this in a bomb shelter at Pak Hun-Il's, Director of the Agricultural Department of the CC in 1952, where Pak Il-u, Choe Chang-ik and others were, in order to work out a program of activities against Kim Il Sung. To do that they had to unite with Pak Hon-yong, and they did. So Hwi told two Koreans coming from China that they would work for ten years in the DPRK not getting a higher title than major-general.

Choe Yong-gon said that Yi Pil-gyu came to the CC KWP and said that they were led by Choe Chang-ik and Pak Chang-ok and that if measures to improve welfare

standards were not taken then there would be major dissatisfaction and that they would have another Poznan on their hands. He was indignant at the fact that Pak Il-u to this day was being held in jail.

Choe Yong-gon also named Minister of Communication Kim Chang-kil, who having warned [the central committee] that he should not be associated with any faction, attacked individual party and state functionaries. Of Pak Chang-ok, he said that that person was a deep-seated factionary and connected to that [factionalist] gang, and that he sent Yun to the Soviet embassy.

Following that, Pak Chang-ok spoke, explaining that he thought that the December Plenum of the CC KWP took a very strict and unfair position in relation to him. He indicated that he was not connected with any group. He was interrupted by the remarks coming from the Presidium and from the hall and was not allowed to continue speaking.

In closing, Kim Il Sung spoke, suggesting organizational measures in relation to Choe Chang-ik, Pak Chang-ok and other individuals about whom the Plenum accepted a well known decree.

In closing Pak Ui-wan said that the Plenum was held under very trying and oppressive conditions. In the country a massive battle has begun, severe repression was called for in the questioning of security workers, drivers, and servants. Essential issues in the party were distorted and matters were presented before the members of the party in such a manner that the malcontents, it would seem, prepared a serious conspiracy, something similar to a palace coup. At present, the discontents have been driven deep down; by its inner strength, he said, the atmosphere in the party would not be relaxed.

Pak noted that the workers, against whom organizational measures were employed, were bad people. But it was impossible to work under conditions of systematic mutual mistrust of leading functionaries toward one another. Things didn't get done and the work was not close to one's heart. He said that knowing his feelings, although he recently switched over to Korean citizenship, he requests that I relay to the Soviet government, that after he returns he would like to be granted Soviet citizenship once again and restored to the ranks of the CPSU.

## DOCUMENT No. 8

### Memorandum of conversation with the charge d' affaires of the Chinese embassy in the DPRK, Chao Ke Xian

*[Source: RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 411, Listy 344-346. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by James F. Person.]*

From the diary of the ambassador of the USSR  
In the DPRK, Comrade Ivanov V.I. for the period  
From 11 to 29 October 1956.

“26” October 1956

#### MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION WITH THE CHARGE D' AFFAIRES OF THE CHINESE EMBASSY IN THE DPRK, CHAO KE XIAN

I received the charge d'affaires of the PRC in the DPRK, Comrade Chao Ke Xian, with the aim of informing him about a meeting with Comrade Kim Il Sung on matters related to the unofficial visit of A.I. Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai to the DPRK. I told Chao Ke Xian that in spite of promises of the Korean leadership given to Comrades Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai to publish the decrees of the CC KWP August and September Plenums, the Korean comrades published a pithy summary of the CC KWP September Plenum only after five days following the September Plenum, on 28 September. Two important items were discussed in this summary. The first item concerns self criticism of the KWP where it was pointed out that the decree on organizational issues of the CC KWP August Plenum was decided successfully, but the course of reaching this decision was absent. The second item contained a call to the party to observe Leninist norms and principles in party life.

Kim Il Sung explained that the first item was omitted consciously since the decree of the August Plenum was not published and in his opinion there is no need to report in the press that these decrees were rash. The CC KWP has never published its decrees on organizational issues and for this reason it is necessary to start publication with a good decree and not with a bad one. Regarding the second question related to the instructions of Leninist norms in party life, Comrade Kim Il Sung declared that the report about the

September Plenum of the CC was published without his involvement while he was away on vacation and that he regrets that the second issue was omitted.

In response to my observation that all that was omitted can be resolved by publishing the decrees of the August and September Plenums, Kim Il Sung answered that the decrees of these plenums and his speech at the September Plenum will be published in a separate brochure and distributed for discussion in party organizations, adding that, the section in which he quotes from Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai will be omitted from his speech, that on the council of the latter the decrees of the August Plenum will be reviewed. By this, according to Kim Il Sung, the aim of not revealing the very fact of the visit of Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai to Korea is achieved, not giving the party masses reason to believe that the decree of the September Plenum was passed under pressure from fraternal parties and that fraternal parties were interfering in our internal affairs.

I informed Chao Ke Xian of Kim Il Sung's claim that he supposedly did not promise Comrades Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai to publish the decrees of the August and September Plenums of the CC KWP, but only promised to consider the matter. Moreover Kim Il Sung said that while discussing the overall results of the September CC Plenum among provincial party activists, many party functionaries expressed doubts in the advisability of commuting the sentences of Choe Chang-ik, Pak Chang-ok and others.

Chao Ke Xian was interested where Pak Chang-ok and Choe Chang-ik were now. I answered that Pak Chang-ok worked as the deputy director of a saw-mill in the town of Hyesanjin, while Choe Chang-ik, it seems, at the present moment was ill.

Chao Ke Xian in turn said that he had not held any special meetings with the Korean leadership on these issues; however the Chinese embassy learned several facts related to these matters, the authenticity of which he was not convinced. For example, in a meeting of the Pyongyang city party activists dedicated to the discussion of the results of the September Plenum, the deputy director of the department of agitation and propaganda of the Pyongyang City Committee of the party spoke, criticizing the breach of democratic centralism in defense of those comrades restored to the party and CC, after which he was excluded from the party. Chairman of the Pyongyang City Committee of the party Yi Song-wook incorrectly spoke out, declaring that comrades Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai came to Pyongyang to find here mistakes and shortcomings in the Workers

Party, but were convinced of the opposite. Chao said also that rumors reached the Chinese embassy that Kim Chang-man belligerently declared to the opposition that no matter how hard they tried, we have an MVD and army.

I asked Chao what the Korean comrades undertook with regards to the request of comrade Peng Dehuai to release from confinement and send to China for studies Pak Il-u who was locked up in prison. Chao responded that so far, it seems nothing is known. Comrade Peng Dehuai, being with Kim Il Sung, communicated to him that if the Korean comrades do not require, but on the contrary, are troubled by the arrival of Pak Il-u and Pan Ho-san in Korea, then the Chinese government agrees to their return to China. As to the question where Pan Ho-san is, Chao answered that Pan Ho-san, like Pak Il-u, was also a Chinese Korean. He has achieved major accomplishments in revolutionary activities in North-eastern China, later he served in the Korean People's Army and commanded one of the armies. Presently, he worked as a simple laborer in a mine.

Chao informed me also that presently those who fled to China, Yun Kong-hum, So Hwi, Kim Chang-il, and Yi Pil-gyu, did not receive rations. The wife of Kim Chang-il turned to the Ministry of Culture and Propaganda but the minister did not receive her and directed her to the chief of the economic section, who performed her wedding, but he too refused to give rations.

I thanked Chao for the discussion.

In the evening I attended a reception organized by Kim Il Sung in honor of the Mongolian government delegation headed by Tsedenbal.

## **DOCUMENT No. 9**

### **Memorandum of conversation with the Chinese ambassador to the DPRK, Qiao Xiao Guang, 5 November 1956.**

*[Source: RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 411, Listy 367-369. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by James F. Person.]*

From the diary of the ambassador of the USSR  
In the DPRK, Comrade Ivanov V.I. for the period  
From 30 October to 14 November 1956.



“5” November 1956

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION WITH PRC AMBASSADOR  
TO THE DPRK, QIAO XIAO GUANG

I received the ambassador of the PRC, Qiao Xiao Guang at his request. After a brief procedural conversation, Qiao asked if I knew anything new about measures of the Korean friends to carry out the decision of the September Plenum. The leadership of the Chinese Communist Party showed great interest in this question according to Qiao.

I said that for the period that had passed since my conversation with the charge d' affaires of the embassy of the PRC in the DPRK, Chao Ke Xian, I did not know anything substantial about measures of the friends on the stated question. According to the existing communications of the unofficial order it is known that the Korean leadership intends to make Choe Chang-ik director of the state committee on preserving monuments of material culture and Pak Chang-ok the director of construction at a cement factory in Madong. From the same communication it is also known that not long ago a meeting of the Presidium of the CC KWP was held where it was decided to release Pak Il-u from imprisonment.

As to Qiao's request that I say something to the effect of how the Korean friends viewed the visit of Comrades Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai to the DPRK, I responded that to judge by the course of the September Plenum, then the reaction of the friends should be considered positive, however, to confirm this categorically would be premature.

In turn I was interested in the opinion of Qiao Xiao Guang in this regard. He answered that he so far has not yet reached a specific conclusion regarding the reaction of the friends to the visit of comrades Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai.

I asked Qiao if Yun Kong-hum, Li Pil-gyu, So Hwi, and Kim Chang-il, located in China, knew about their rehabilitation to the KWP and if they intended to return to the DPRK.

Qiao said that they were aware of that decision. Not wishing to return to the DPRK, they want to ask the government of the DPRK to allow their families to depart to China since they know also that the Korean government was not pressing for their return to the DPRK. Qiao said further that in receiving Yun Kong-hum, So Hwi, Kim Chang-il

and Yi Pil-gyu in an address to the CC CCP and CC CPSU they blamed the Korean leadership for destroying a number of notable party actors in the period after liberation and during the war; for leading the country and party with anti-democratic methods; for incorrectly appointing and cultivating leading cadres. In connection with this they considered Pak Chong-ae, Pak Kum-chul, Kim Chang-man, and Han Song-do individuals unqualified to occupy leading posts in the party; finally, they charged that the leadership did not carry out a struggle with Kim Il Sung's personality cult.

Qiao added that without having any materials confirming these statements, the CC CCP displayed understandable caution with regard to the indicated letter.

I informed Qiao Xiao Guang that the Korean leadership released Yi Sang-jo from his duties as ambassador of the DPRK in Moscow and requested from the Soviet government an agreement on Yi Sung-pal, working nowadays as the director of the educational department of the CC KWP. According to the Korean friends, Yi Sang-jo refuses to return to the DPRK and in all likelihood will remain in the PRC.

To my question if the Chinese embassy had the decree of the August Plenum of the CC KWP on organizational matters, Qiao answered that they did not have it, but the delegation of the KWP to the VIII Congress of the CCP delivered the above decree to Mao Zedong.

Present at the meeting was the first secretary of the embassy, Samsanov G.E.

The meeting was translated by the translator of the Chinese embassy, Won Bao-min.