

An Amateur History of North Korea

(1948 - 2016)

By Jairo

Introduction

Thanks for looking over this short literary piece I've written. Do note that this is titled "An Amateur History" because I am by no means an expert; I'm simply a history buff who takes pride in being as wholly factual as possible. If you notice anything that compromises that goal, please message me.

Why North Korea?

North Korea is a strange, strange place. Its history before independence was nothing short of strife and utter hardship not unlike that of its patron saint the Soviet Union. Humiliatingly, after entering a period of self-determination following Japanese occupation, it had to be bailed out of a civil war by its older brother, China.

Now, in the modern age of globalization, the hermit kingdom remains to its own devices - more or less of their own accord. Economic sanctions and international condemnations prevent the belligerent dictatorship from doing anything rash, but its current leader has grown exceptionally militant and threatening in recent months. Increased nuclear testing and pronouncements regarding preemptive invasion are broadcast on television every week now.

That is my reason for embarking on this challenge to faithfully document the history of the Democratic People's Republic. My intention is to inform how the North came to be, why it acts the way it does, and what its next moves might be. Its presence on the world stage is enigmatic at best and terrifying in the least. To explain its origins and shed some light on its history, I hope to disseminate misconceptions about the Land of Eternal Peace.

What to Expect in This Mini-History

This booklet will be as simple-English, compact, and self-contained as possible. In other words, I will explain concepts and events as accessibly and briefly as I can with the intention that this booklet provide all necessary information within its pages, saving you the effort of having to scrounge around for clarification.

I've divided the history of North Korea into eight main chapters with their own host of smaller subchapters inside. Occasionally you will encounter large gray boxes with a quote in them. I use those to preface a subsection with context or an interesting quip. I urge you to read over them.

With all of that out of the way, I hope you enjoy!

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Table of Contents	2
Timeline	3
(1876 - 1945) Setting the Stage for Korean Division	5
(1945 - 1948) The Foundation of the Democratic People's Republic	12
(1948 - 1950) The Limits of Diplomacy	14
(1950 - 1953) Fratricide: The Korean War	16
(1953 - 1970) A Changing World, A Changing Society	19
(1970 - 1994) End of an Era	24
(1994 - 2011) The Reign of Supreme Leader Kim Jong-il	27
(2011 - 2016) The Hermit Kingdom Today	30
Final Thoughts	34
Bibliography	35

Timeline

1868 - Meiji Restoration begins in Japan

Japanese military modernized, policy of aggressive expansion adopted

1876 - Treaty of Ganghwa forces Korea into Japan's sphere of influence

1895 - First Sino-Japanese War ends in a decisive Japanese victory

Chinese vassalage of Korea ends

1905 - Russo-Japanese War ends in a prestigious Japanese victory

Eulsa Treaty makes Korea a Japanese protectorate

1910 - Japan-Korea Treaty of 1910 formally annexes Korea into the Empire of Japan

1919 - March First Independence Movement in Korea is put down by Japanese authorities

1926 - Emperor Hirohito comes into power in Japan

New set of harsh reforms passed against Korea

Forced labor, colonial conscription, and mass censorship become commonplace

Communism, Christianity, and self-determination merge with traditional Korean culture

1930 - Japan virtually eliminates Korean culture through "Japanization" edicts

1945 - World War II ends, Japanese Empire dissolved

Korea is occupied by Soviet and American forces

1948 - North and South Korea are founded

Kim Il-sung leads the North, Syngman Rhee leads the South

1950 - Korean War begins

North conquers South

UN steps in and conquers North

1951 - Chinese intervene on behalf of North Korea, push UN peacekeepers out

1952 - War enters stalemate at 38th parallel until its conclusion

1953 - Korean War ends with armistice at Panmunjom

DMZ established between North and South Korea

1955 - *Juche* introduced in North Korea

1968 - Kim Il-sung greenlights assassination of South Korean president, plan fails

North Korean Navy captures USS Pueblo to deflect world attention

1975 - North Korea joins the Non-Aligned Movement, influences third world with *Juche*

1985 - North Korea ratifies the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

1994 - North Korea assessed “nuke free”

Kim Il-sung dies

1995 - Widespread famine occurs in North Korea

1997 - Kim Jong-il succeeds Kim Il-sung

2006 - First nuclear test occurs

Kim Jong-il builds up military, increases tensions with the South

2009 - Second nuclear test

North Korea re-enters world's focus as militarism increases

2011 - Kim Jong-il dies, Kim Jong-un succeeds him

2013 - Third nuclear test

Missile launch frequency increases

Kim Jong-un purges top aides to subvert a coup attempt

2016 - Hydrogen bomb test successful

UN embargo cripples North Korean economy

China and Russia break off diplomatic ties with North Korea

Nuclear miniaturization, multi-stage rocket engines perfected

North Korea threatens to nuke China, China denounces and embargoes North Korea

Setting the Stage for Korean Division (1876 - 1945)

“There was a period when our nation brought to bear great sufferings upon the people of the Korean Peninsula. The deep sorrow that I feel over this will never be forgotten.”

~ Emperor Akihito of Japan, 1996, apologizing for Japan's occupation of Korea

To understand the Korean Peninsula is to first understand the empire that occupied, industrialized, and brutalized it. For that reason, we will begin with an up-close look at Japanese history near the turn of the century.

The Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) in Japan compressed two centuries of industrial revolution into thirty short years, unequivocally making the Land of the Rising Sun the most advanced nation in the Far East save for the colonial empires of Europe stationed there. Japan desired colonies as well, and so in 1876 emulated the unrestricted authoritarianism of the West by bullying lesser nations such as the Land of the Morning Calm - Korea.

Gunboat Diplomacy

“Once the wind of Western civilization blows to the East, every blade of grass and every tree in the East [must] follow what the Western wind brings... We do not have time to wait for the enlightenment of our neighbors so that we can work together toward the development of Asia. It is better for us to leave the ranks of Asian nations and cast our lot with civilized nations of the West... We should deal with them exactly as the Westerners do.”

~ Fukuzawa Yukichi, 1885, influential Meiji Era political theorist

The Opium Wars against China from 1842-1860 severely weakened her resolve and military in defending her subjects. A loose federation of states, the Qing Dynasty resembled the Holy Roman Empire of old with its princes that acted more independently than the entity they were supposed to be members to. *Bakumatsu*, the fateful landing of American Commodore Matthew C. Perry in Tokyo harbor, marked a new age of Asian dominance. Since time immemorial, China was the undisputed regional power of the Far East. With the aid of American foreign veterans and contractors, however, Japan seized the title and quickly adopted western ideals so that they, too, could subjugate inferior nations and build their own prosperous colonial empire.

This embracing of western ideals is called the Meiji Restoration after Emperor Meiji the Great who sat the throne following 600 years of samurai dominance. During *Sengoku Jidai*, the Age of the Country at War, medieval Japan was led in name by the emperor and in practice by

the *shogun*, a military dictator. The 1868 dissolution of the shogunate and ascension of Emperor Meiji represented the reversal of said roles and led the nation into a new era of prosperity and technological advancement. Railroads were constructed, land was redistributed, the samurai were disbanded, and the military was modernized. Lever-action, revolving, and fully-automatic guns made their way to Japanese hands by way of American trade, along with a host of superior western naval designs which were appropriated with all deliberate speed.

Looking to flex their muscles, Japan sailed several of their new toys to the island of Ganghwa, Korea, to instigate a conflict. Korea, who had been prodded numerous times prior by foreign powers like France, Britain, and the United States, fired on the western-looking vessel as soon as it appeared. Usually, western powers sailed away because they took the hint of being unwanted, but the Japanese returned fire and destroyed a Korean fort in place at Ganghwa. Realizing their militaristic inferiority, the Empire of Korea agreed to a treaty in 1876 outlining fealty to the Japanese Empire. Usually one to protect their honor, a decrepit China wrought by civil war relented and allowed the treaty to pass without so much as a sneeze of disapproval. Two decades later, Japan capitalized on China's preoccupation and handily beat them, officially abolishing Korea's status as a vassal state to China. Although friendly in superficial intention, the ulterior motive of such goodwill was to vassalize Korea for themselves and thus make complete Japan's transformation into a western empire.

The Rising Sun's victories in securing not only exclusive trade rights with Korea (Treaty of Ganghwa) but also diplomatic opportunity was key to its further growth as a world power. Korea's freedom from Chinese rule meant that the Land of the Morning Calm was independent, yes, but that it also lacked the most powerful ally it could have in protecting said independence. The stage was set for Japan to seize the day.

The Bear Against the Sun

"I thought Japan would probably whip her on the sea, but I could not be certain; and between ourselves - for you must not breathe this to anybody - I was thoroughly well pleased with the Japanese victory, for Japan is playing our game."

~ President Theodore Roosevelt, 1904, referring to the Japanese attack at Port Arthur

The Empire of Japan pressed its luck in 1904 when it launched a surprise attack against the Russian navy stationed at Port Arthur in China, tremendously crippling Russian morale and shocking the world. No European power had been humbled by an Asian nation in so extravagant a fashion until that point. President Theodore Roosevelt helped broker a peace between the two empires, bringing great shame to the Russian tsar and great fame to the Japanese emperor. Japan thus joined the other great powers - namely the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and Austria-Hungary - as a force of nature and continued to

influence international politics until the middle of the twentieth century. Japan's desire to become truly western was nearly complete: it was recognized among its mentors, but still did not possess a colony. Its next moves would remedy that.

One year after the Russo-Japanese War, the United States secretly met with Japan to talk about sphere of influence concerns in Asia. The Philippines came under American control in 1898 after the Spanish-American War, and due to its proximity, solicited fears of future Japanese expansion. Secretary of War William Howard Taft met with Prime Minister Katsura Taro to put said fears to rest. "We have no interest in your Philippines," Katsura assured. "We only desire Korea." With that, the Taft-Katsura Memorandum came to a close with Taft guaranteeing that the United States wouldn't involve itself with a Japanese subjugation of Korea so long as Japan would leave the Philippines alone.

Doubly confident as a result of their successes in war and on the negotiating table, Japan proceeded to bully their puppet-to-be. Arriving at the court of the Morning Calm's emperor, Japan's new prime minister outstretched his hand to deliver a message - a despicably unequal treaty that would endanger Korean sovereignty. When Emperor Gojong refused to sign, Japanese soldiers surrounded the palace and took Seoul, Korea's capital, hostage. Under extreme duress, the Korean royal cabinet snapped and signed the treaty, ensuring Japanese assumption over Korean foreign affairs and trade and making the peninsula a protectorate. In 1907 the cabinet was forced to sign another treaty, this time forfeiting their right to rule by permitting a Japanese general to oversee construction, development, and negotiation in the country - activities usually reserved for the peninsula's emperor.

Graduating From De Facto to De Jure

"It became more and more clear, however, that the aim of the Japanese was nothing else than the entire absorption of the country and the destruction of every trace of Korean nationality."

~ F. A. McKenzie, 1920, ardent East Asian historian

The hermit kingdom had gone from being uncomfortably humiliated to actively turned against their will. *De facto* (by practice) Japanese rule became *de jure* (by law) with the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1910, authorizing its annexation despite never being signed by Emperor Sunjong (son of Gojong) nor his cabinet. Instead, it was signed by Lee Wan-yong, Resident General to Korea as appointed by the Japanese government. The treaty's legitimacy was recognized by the United Kingdom who, in 1902, had formed an alliance with Japan. The United States, as per the Taft-Katsura Memorandum, did not object to the treaty's legality. Korea thus became an official part of the Empire of the Rising Sun and Japan completed its transformation.

Industrialization had begun under the reign of Gojong but proceeded with all due haste after Japan took control. A Meiji coalition consisting of military generals, merchant investors, and

proprietary industrial leaders immediately started work on developing and exploiting the peninsula. Japan's growing overpopulation and lack of arable land made the new subject a popular migration hotspot, gradually pushing Korean natives out of their hometowns and farms. When occupation began, Japanese citizens owned roughly 8% of all farmland in Korea. By 1932, that figure had grown to over 50%. Increasing Japanese migration also led to the establishment of new schools in Korea, most of which taught Japanese language and culture in tandem with Korean language and culture. This hybrid education weakened as occupation wore on, reaching terrifying levels in the late 1930s and early 1940s when Korean aspects were removed from the picture entirely. Originally intended to assimilate native Koreans into the empire, the "Japanization" of education rapidly evolved into nothing short of a propaganda machine. Korea was being transformed into a second Japan.

When World War I broke out, Japan honored their alliance with the United Kingdom and joined on the side of the Allies. Factory construction in Korea grew during this time to fulfill production orders. Tens of thousands of men were forced into factories to manufacture ammunition, rifles, and uniforms during the war with thousands more being deported to Japan to reduce factory vacancies. Japan never joined the war in any significant capacity, but supplying what they could to the warring powers created a new class of experienced, white-collar tradesmen in Korea as well as built up the coffers of the imperial government.

Civil Disobedience and Cultural Cleansing

"...the consulate [in Seoul] should be extremely careful not to encourage any belief that the United States will assist the Korean nationalists in carrying out their plans and that it should not do anything which may cause Japanese authorities to suspect [the] American Government sympathizes with the Korean nationalist movement."

~ U.S. State Department, 1919, official statement regarding the March First Movement

Besides the erasure of their culture, many things looked to be improving for Korea as a result of occupation. Contempt began to show through the cracks however, especially as Japanese police and military stationed there grew progressively more racist toward their subjects. Korean natives living in urban areas were actively discriminated against and berated in public. And due to the Japanese encroachment of farmland, no Korean could escape to the tranquility and freedom of the countryside. All had to endure constant harassment. To salt the wound of developing cries for liberation, the Japanese government actively censored newspaper publications if they didn't praise Japan, festering additional discontent in millions of already disgruntled Korean nationals.

President Woodrow Wilson offered his Fourteen Points at the end of World War I to create a world of peace, justice, and as he put it, self-determination. Koreans grew very attached to Wilson's proposed policy of allowing nations to rule themselves rather than being cut up or

occupied, faithfully advocating for his elaboration that “a free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims” should be applied. His dissemination of self-determination was made in reference to the colonies of Germany, but Japan, Britain, France, and others took it as a sign to preserve their colonial empires as well - and so Korea did not have the luxury of participating in Wilson’s suggested freedom for all.

Distraught, crowds of civilians protested Japanese rule through marches, sit-ins, and other nonviolent means. With over two million participants taking part in 1,500 demonstrations, Japanese military and police forces on the peninsula couldn’t keep order, and so opened fire. By the March First Movement’s end, over 7,500 were killed, nearly 16,000 were wounded, and 46,000 were arrested. Many who were arrested faced torture, death, or imprisonment without due process or trial. The failed independence movement was a small flicker in the hopes of Korean nationalists everywhere, but was mercilessly stamped out by their overlords. Passive hostility against their overlord’s rule diverged into other aspects of civil disobedience like wearing traditional robes or writing in Hangul (the alphabet of Korea).

As Japan pushed for the adherence to Shinto, its state religion, Koreans embraced foreign missionaries more and more openly to combat Japan’s cultural cleansing program. Pyongyang became a center for western culture and Christianity as Christian populations throughout Korea doubled between 1914 and 1934, barring Japanese influence in affected regions (the emperor didn’t want to impede voluntary westernization). Some missionaries sympathetic to the Korean struggle created a syncretic form of Christianity which incorporated traditional Confucian elements, drawing more converts. Communist literature resonated especially well with Koreans in the north where industry was concentrated (65% of all industry on the peninsula) and was commonly smuggled in disguised as Bibles. Population in the north swelled due to forced labor relocation, religious haven hotspots, and general distance from Japanese influence, creating a fertile environment for the works of Karl Marx discussing the plight of the worker to gain traction. This growing interest in communism drew the ire of Tokyo, and so all local newspaper publications which were originally censored were outright seized and shut down by the government. Fearing further abolishment of information privileges, Korean solidarity took a backburner to satisfying the desires of the Rising Sun.

In 1940, an edict was published advocating for Koreans to change their surnames to Japanese ones. 80% of the population obeyed as their overlord introduced new reform for conscription into the Imperial Japanese Army. Three years earlier, war had begun against China in what was known as the Second Sino-Japanese War. Factory construction exploded to meet supply demands as hundreds of thousands of Koreans were conscripted to fight for their imperial master. By 1945, Korea made up 32% of Japan’s labor force, a vital organ in the Japanese war machine. Soon enough, however, Japan would go beyond assaulting China and exploiting Korea to betray the very nation that helped them modernize - the United States.

The Ascendancy of Hirohito

“Oh, God, control the cruel beastliness of the soldiers in Nanking tonight, comfort the heartbroken mothers and fathers whose innocent sons have been shot today, and guard the young women and girls through the long agonizing hours of this night. Speed the day when wars shall be no more. When thy Kingdom will come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

~ Minnie Vautrin, 1937, American missionary present during the Rape of Nanking

The Empire of the Rising Sun entered a period of conspicuous fascism and martial dominion through the guidance of its new leader, Emperor Hirohito, in 1926. Under the auspices of his rule, Korea experienced the harshest reforms it would come to bear (“Japanization,” forced labor, and cultural erasure all happened under his direction). Hirohito was ambitious; dangerously so. He created a powerful cult of personality for himself as the son of Amaterasu (a goddess from folklore) to enrapture his population with undying fanaticism and trust in his edicts. Bespectacled, short-tempered, and divine, Hirohito was a ruthless and no-nonsense type of leader.

As a victor of the First World War, Japan held the titular title of Permanent Council Member in the League of Nations. As such, the empire was expected to be honorable, laconic, and fair in its deliberation before the League. Instead, it was boisterous, belligerent, and wholly unprofessional, driving many away from seeking trade or friendship with them. The United States remained a loyal trade partner anyway, making up some 90% of Japan’s oil imports. Japan, however, wasn’t content with importing resources - in fact, they found it embarrassing. “An empire whose colonies cannot provide for its fatherland is not an empire at all,” Hirohito fictitiously quipped.

In 1936, a former Austrian painter offered Emperor Hirohito a mutual declaration of friendship against communism known as the Anti-Comintern Pact. The agreement, which came at a time of communist influence permeating Korea and international diplomatic alienation, was obviously accepted. The Empire of Japan and Nazi Germany were thus allied with Italy in tow. The Axis Powers, as they were called, was formed.

As mentioned in the previous subchapter, Japan launched an invasion against China in 1937. Hirohito’s brutality truly came to light with the horrifically named Rape of Nanking perpetrated in the December of that year. Nanking was, at the time, the capital of China, and therefore warranted a major celebration upon capture. Thousands of civilians moved west when word of advancing Japanese warships arrived. Soldiers that did remain to defend the capital were gassed to death (which was a war crime as per a League resolution). Only 300,000 noncombatants remained in the city when Japanese boots made it inside. Four weeks later, this number was 0. The city was surrounded, quarantined, and strip-searched. After rounding up the civilian population, the Imperial Japanese Army sectioned off how each group would be handled. Men were either murdered or deported for biological experimentation camps like Unit 731. Children were forced to slave away in Korean factories manufacturing

ammunition. Women were brutally raped and then killed. Soldiers targeted housing blocks where they would gang rape mothers, daughters, grandmothers, whoever, and then torture them to death, hence the event's name "Rape of Nanking." Thousands of rape-murders happened every day around the clock until the capital's population was exterminated a mere month after capture. Korean consciousness reawakened after the tragedy's occurrence, leading some to expatriate in hopes of scrounging up supply or manpower to overthrow the Japanese before an equivalent Rape of Nanking could happen in Seoul or Pyongyang. Kim Il-sung, future leader of North Korea, was one such expatriate.

Although thoroughly disgusted by Japanese barbarism, no country involved themselves with the war crime (due in part to Japan's allies over in Europe mucking about). One country in particular, the United States, embargoed the Japanese, starving their war machine of much needed metals and oil and effectively bringing their advances in China to a halt. On December 7th, 1941, Hirohito would let President Franklin D. Roosevelt know what he thought of that embargo.

The Eagle Against the Sun

"The hallowed spirits of Our Imperial Ancestors guarding Us from above, We rely upon the loyalty and courage of Our subjects in Our confident expectation that the task bequeathed by Our forefathers will be carried forward and that the sources of evil will be speedily eradicated and an enduring peace immutably established in East Asia, preserving thereby the glory of Our Empire."

~ Japanese Board of Information, 1941, declaring war upon the United States and Britain

During the Second World War, Japan "employed" roughly 200,000 comfort women from their colonial possession of Korea (thousands more were taken from Chinese, Filipino, Malaysian, etc. holdings) to maintain troop morale. Approximately three quarters of said sex slaves died while "working" and a number of survivors were left infertile due to sexual trauma.

After the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii brought the United States into the war, their luck turned sour. At Midway, American forces irreversibly crippled Japanese naval capacities and put them on the defensive until the end of the war. Suicide defenses at Okinawa and Iwo Jima tapped into the *bushido*, or warrior's code, of Japanese culture to inflict harrowing casualties on American troops. Unimpaired, Yankee boots trekked across imperial Japanese possessions, setting them free, and then dropped two atomic bombs on military production centers Hiroshima and Nagasaki to goad the Rising Sun into setting. Japan obliged, and on September 2, 1945, World War II came to a close.

The Foundation of the Democratic People's Republic (1945 - 1948)

"Citizens are guaranteed freedom of speech, the press, assembly, demonstration and association. The State guarantees the conditions for the free activities of democratic political parties and social organizations."

~ Revised North Korean Constitution, 2009, Article 67

The Land of the Morning Calm thus became the Land of the Daily Struggle thanks to Japanese supervision. With their language all but eradicated and their peninsula all but unoccupied, the Korean people pressed for independence. The dissolution of the Japanese Empire meant a chance at freedom for the peninsula, and so they pressed on with all manner of excitement. Their hopes would be dashed when their new overlords inherited the throne - the Soviet Union and United States.

Occupational Hazards

"The time has come when we Korean people have to unite our strength to build a new, democratic Korea. People from all strata should display patriotic enthusiasm and turn out to build a new Korea. To contribute positively to the work of building the state, let those with strength give strength, let those with knowledge give knowledge, let those with money give money, and let all people who truly love their country, their nation and democracy unite closely and build an independent and sovereign democratic state."

~ Kim Il-sung, 1945, at a victory speech in Pyongyang

Shortly after dropping two atomic bombs on Japan, the United States suggested the 38th parallel be the dividing line between Soviet and American occupation forces in Korea. Premier of the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin agreed without argument. Nine million Koreans and the Christian stronghold of Pyongyang were thus beset under Stalin's eye. Sixteen million and the immemorial capital of Seoul were President Truman's to bear.

As Soviet forces pushed into Korea, a provisional government was established by local communists called the People's Republic of Korea (PRK) to fill the incoming power vacuum. North of the parallel, Soviets humored the government and worked with it as a legitimate form because of its overtly socialist intentions. For that same reason, the United States disbanded the government within their sector. The Moscow Conference of 1945 established a set intention for Korea to be unified under one government. The process was to be overseen by a Joint Commission manned by a shadow organization. Both sides of the parallel were wary of

such a commission (Cold War paranoia was in full bloom), and so made moves instead to found their own governments without its help.

To this end, a Korean guerrilla fighter known as Kim Il-sung came out of the woodworks to found a political party in the north's provisional government. Kim had been an ardent communist throughout his youth, joining both the communist parties of Korea and China and leaving to train with the Red Army during World War II with the intention to lead Korean citizens against Japan. He was a charismatic, determined, fanatical kind of person, and easily found friends where he should have found competition. His Workers' Party of North Korea dominated junior politics in the People's Republic of Korea and established him as a seasoned politician. For his service with the Red Army and thorough indoctrination with communist scripture, Stalin honored him a war hero. Kim's party helped pass a series of communist reforms in the PRK including redistribution of land and nationalization of railroads, factories, and banks, transforming northern Korea into a communist-tolerant if not supportive region. Thanks to the Japanese industrial centers already in place above the 38th parallel, northern Korea was also an affluent testament to communist superiority, a far cry from the grinding poverty in the south.

Although both sides were suspicious of Joint Commission effectiveness in reuniting the peninsula, the United States still viewed it as their best chance at bringing peace quickly and quietly. Galvanizing Cold War tensions provoked a change in policy, unfortunately, and so the United States acted instead to curb Soviet influence in the region.

The United States made an appeal to the United Nations in 1947 to enforce joint efforts in reuniting the peninsula. As such, the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea was founded to try and hold democratic reunification elections on both sides of the parallel, but the Soviet Union refused to recognize its authority and barred it entry. In August 1948, as the only Korea to hold said election, the Republic of Korea (ROK) was founded with Syngman Rhee as its president. It consisted wholly of the Korean peninsula below the 38th parallel. In mirrored intention, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), a successor state to the PRK, was established north of the parallel one month later with Kim Il-sung as its leader. Joseph Stalin recognized North Korea as sovereign of the whole peninsula while the United Nations acknowledged South Korea as the true Korea. The Workers' Party of North Korea merged with its southern counterpart to form the Workers' Party of Korea and played part to the Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland, Kim Il-sung's subversive action to acquire the "democratic people's republic" moniker in his new dictatorship's official title.

The Limits of Diplomacy (1948 - 1950)

“Every Communist must grasp the truth, ‘Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.’ Our principle is that the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party.”

~ Mao Zedong, 1938, at a war strategy rally

The foundation of North Korea was done in response to the foundation of South Korea - it was not a proactive measure but rather a reactive one. As such, there existed a lot of holes in the North's premature authority that needed fixing: the formation of a national army, the creation of a strong central government, and the establishment of diplomatic relations.

Consolidation of Power

“Kim Il sung not only presided over the birth of a new nation in an old land, he was inextricably bound to the fate of North Korea. Perhaps to a greater degree than any other modern political leader, he may be seen as the full embodiment of the state. Indeed, Kim was more integral to state and society in North Korea than Stalin in the Soviet Union, or Mao in China.”

~ G. Cameron Hurst III, 2003, professor of Japanese and Korean studies

Stalin was keen on maintaining his foothold in East Asia, and so provided the Korean People's Army with modern equipment like medium tanks, artillery pieces, and crates full of small arms and ammunition. Kim utilized tactics and training learned during his time with the Red Army to turn the Korean People's Army into a crack guerrilla military ready to engage in combat at a moment's notice. They were experienced in sabotage, infiltration, stealth, and asymmetrical urban warfare.

Simultaneously, Kim sought to solidify his position as dictator - now retitled “Great Leader” - by erecting enormous statues across the urban centers of North Korea. Citizens paid thanks to their Eternal President and the Party for protecting them from the imperialists in the south, as various propaganda posters assured. Kim Il-sung's transformation into a cult of personality icon akin to Emperor Hirohito was nearing completion but wouldn't be fully realized until his proclamation of a political religion, *Juche*, in 1955.

In 1949, Mao Zedong drove out Nationalist forces from the mainland and established the People's Republic of China (PRC), a predominantly communist state. Already intertwined with Soviet affairs, the North now placed China on its resumé as a trusted ally. Trade between the

two was vital to the North Korean economy, seeing some 80% of exports leaving to Chinese consumers.

The stage was set for reunification, and so Great Leader pursued it wholeheartedly with the belief that he had the blessings of both Mao and Stalin.

Atrocities in South Korea

“[Syngman] Rhee will be killed in a few weeks, when the Korean people find out the truth.”

~ General Douglas MacArthur, 1952, speaking of Rhee's pre-war massacres

While the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea conducted elections in South Korea, communist sympathizers bombed polling stations, killing 600. In response, President Rhee excluded all communists from political participation in South Korea, forcing them in exile across the parallel where they were met with open arms.

In a ROK government campaign of stringent anti-communism, 30,000 leftists were killed in a single demonstration alone. The world seemed to be coming down on the heads of communists seeking democratic representation in the South as over 30,000 known communists were jailed and a further 300,000 were sent to re-education (concentration) camps.

Kim Il-sung was by no means a saint (a god, if you ask a North Korean), but Syngman Rhee fared no better. He was an autocratic, far-right, bloodthirsty tyrant whose only qualification for being president was that he hated communists. And for a United States so enraptured by the fear of the Reds, that was all that mattered.

Fratricide: The Korean War (1950 - 1953)

“Freedom is not free.”

~ Korean War Veterans Memorial inscription, 1995, Washington, D.C.

After thoroughly regulating and corralling his way into a favorable position to attempt reunification militarily, Kim Il-sung committed. When American forces pulled out of South Korea in 1949, they weren't expecting a conflict in the peninsula (the Soviet Union had pulled out a year earlier), and especially not one as destructive as it turned out to be. Skirmishes between the North and South occurred at the parallel since their foundations two years before, but in 1950 things took a radical turn for the worse.

The Fall of Seoul and Conquest of South Korea

“Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier. I felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall, Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our own shores.”

~ President Harry Truman, 1950, referring to domino theory

On June 25, 1950, combined arms of the North Korean People's Army overwhelmed the under-equipped, undermanned, and under-experienced South Korean military. Northern combat aircraft, motorized infantry, and light artillery flooded across the parallel, approaching Seoul in a mere three days. At the behest of Syngman Rhee, the Hangang Bridge leading to Seoul was destroyed - drowning 4,000 refugees trying to flee - and 100,000 communists detained in re-education camps were executed to prevent defection. The demolition failed to slow the enemy's advance and Seoul fell on June 28. American forces left over to advise military actions and responding South Korean personnel were overrun just south of Seoul between June and August, culminating in the North Korean conquest of South Korea by September - save for a small port city in the southeast called Pusan.

Indeed, President Harry Truman was afraid of a totally communist Korea, which at the time appeared quite apparent, and so delegated authority to Douglas MacArthur, trusted general of the Pacific Theater during World War II, to handle the situation. Domino theory, the predominant American political philosophy of the early Cold War, dictated that if one nation fell to communism that its neighbors were likely to follow suit, justifying his role in assisting the

South. China had already fallen, and northern Korea not soon afterward - if the South were to fall, it might set off Japan. MacArthur led the United Nations's "police action" (legalese for "military campaign") on the peninsula in September with some 80% of its forces consisting of American soldiers, landing at two points.

In Pusan, UN forces reinforced South Korean soldiers committed to a last stand, effectively stalemating an otherwise hopeless battle. MacArthur sailed a contingent of soldiers to secure Seoul by landing at a town a short distance south of it called Inchon. The landing there in mid-September turned the tide of the war as UN forces retook Seoul and cut the overextended North Korean military in half. Encircled North Korean divisions were captured or futilely fought until the last man as Pyongyang fell in early October. Without any momentum from their initial victories and now standing face-to-face with a formidable enemy, Kim Il-sung's elite guerrilla corps collapsed. The tables turned as UN boots stamped across the North Korean interior, eventually coming right up to the Yalu River - the riparian boundary between the Korean Peninsula and China - and threatened an end to North Korean sovereignty.

What was first feared to be a communist victory now clearly showed to be a democratic one. All that was left to do was secure remaining hold-outs in the northeast and finally unify the two Koreas into a single, free democratic state.

The Chinese Intervention

"While I was not consulted prior to the President's decision to intervene in support of the Republic of Korea, that decision from a military standpoint, proved a sound one, as we hurled back the invader and decimated his forces. Our victory was complete, and our objectives within reach, when Red China intervened with numerically superior ground forces."

~ General Douglas MacArthur, 1951, after being relieved of service

Seeking to protect their own national security, China informed the United Nations that it would conduct military action against peacekeeping forces if they came into contact with the Yalu River border. After UN forces did just that, two divisions of Chinese infantry flooded into the peninsula, pushing enemy forces far into the North Korean interior. China joined the war in defense of North Korea, a move feared by the American high command. A particular battle, the Battle of Chosin Reservoir, marked a significant turning point in the war as UN troops were forced out of North Korea entirely and across the parallel, although not without inflicting heavy casualties first. The war proved to be nothing but a bloody stalemate from that point on.

As Seoul was captured for the third time, Chinese boots prepared to forego the capital in advance notice of a supreme UN counteroffensive. In January 1951, Chinese troops crossed the parallel back into North Korean soil and let Seoul be seized for the fourth and final time two months later. Fighting grew less intense as both the PRC and USA realized that costs were growing too high to justify reunification or public support and entered preliminary peace talks at

Kaesong in the North. Looking to gain an upper hand in these negotiations, the UN conducted several high casualty offensives all along the border, failing to secure any meaningful amounts of territory or inflict any morale shocks against entrenched Chinese troops.

By late March, fighting had subsided to medium-sized border skirmishes around the 38th parallel. In April, General Douglas MacArthur was relieved of his command as leader of UN peacekeeping forces in Korea and occupational officer in Japan following suggestions to nuke the Chinese and force them to retreat. For another year, fighting continued bitterly on and off until in 1953 when negotiation parties met in the town of Panmunjom to discuss peace terms that both parties were willing to accept. Weeks before the next negotiation parties were to meet, weary Chinese troops plotted to conduct a final major offensive against UN forces to catalyze a peace by scaring the hell out of them. Their strategy worked as a massive spearhead movement tore holes in peacekeeper lines, forcing an armistice.

The Cost of Conflict

"I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity."

~ General Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1946, speaking as a veteran soldier and commander

In 1952, President Dwight D. Eisenhower entered office in the United States. His campaign ran on a promise to bring an end to the stalemate in Korea, and that he did. On July 23, 1953, a ceasefire was agreed upon. The terms of peace? *Status quo ante bellum* - the way things were before the war. For 2.5 million dead men, uniform or no, North or South, Chinese or American, the result of what was essentially civil war was nothing. Millions more were displaced with nowhere to go, and hundreds of thousands of others were split from their families as the DMZ descended like an iron curtain.

The 38th parallel remained the border between North and South Korea, however, national borders were modified to reflect presently held land at the time of negotiation. A demilitarized zone manned by United Nations peacekeepers, joint Korean military personnel, and American soldiers was established along the entirety of the 160 mile (250 kilometer) long border. The sovereignties of both North and South Korea remained intact. For the first time since 1876, Korea was free. Unhindered by looming conflict or foreign strong-arming, the Korean Peninsula was left to its own devices; a welcome, if not long overdue, salutary neglect.

A Changing World, A Changing Society (1953 - 1970)

"While there are still imperialist aggressors, the state that has no defense power of its own to protect its sovereignty against the internal and external enemies is, in fact, not a fully independent and sovereign state."

~ Eternal President Kim Il-sung, 1972, speaking of North Korean integrity

Bearing the brunt of the Korean War, the South was in no position to claim equivalence, let alone superiority. Seoul, the Republic's capital, had been devastated by a change of hands and a desperate president. Looted, sacked, and destroyed, the whole of the Republic of Korea appeared a shadow of its former self.

Its brother in the North, meanwhile, prospered under Sino-Soviet eyes. Kim Il-sung became a benevolent president whose reforms carried his people to enlightenment and prosperity, humiliating the capitalist West.

Paranoia, Finger-Pointing, and Internal Decay

"He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore."

~ Sigmund Freud, 1905, revered psychoanalyst

Outwardly the North purported a wealthy and stable facade. Inside, however, a different story was developing. The Korean War was a success for Kim as much as not getting food poisoning after eating grossly out-dated meat is a success. Military parades were held in Pyongyang for weeks to celebrate the brave defense of the fatherland against the aggressor imperialists as North Korean media and propaganda outlets worked overtime.

Kim Il-sung was not one to rest on his laurels; in fact, he was one to scrutinize them. One month after the ceasefire at Panmunjom, Kim had eleven supposed conspirators tried and executed for treason. Pak Hon-yong, Foreign Minister of the DPRK, was executed as well for his miscalculation in the South's failure to welcome the North's invasion. South Korean leftists who were displaced by Syngman Rhee's anti-communist policies were also targeted under suspicions of being sleeper agents or spies.

As Kim's cult of personality grew, so too did his opponents on the political field. Following the death of Stalin in 1953 and the ascension of Nikita Khrushchev in the Soviet Union, a wave of anti-Stalinist sentiment resonated within the global communist movement. Great

Leader was criticized both inside and outside his country for embracing Stalinist economic policies and social practices, prompting him to conduct an insular investigation (purge) on the Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland to weed out enemies of the state. By 1960, 70% of its members had been removed from political office, assumedly either dead or living in “friendship camps,” concentration camps dotted around the countryside of the North.

Eternal President Becomes a Prophet

"The basis of the *Juche* Idea is that man is the master of all things and the decisive factor in everything."

~ Eternal President Kim Il-sung, 1977, reminiscing about his political religion's creation

Kim Il-sung needed a force to unify the Korean people. Recent events struck fear and doubt into his citizens, and the newest generation was expansive and impressable. In 1955, he introduced a new political ideology - religion - based on his own brand of Marxist-Leninism called *Juche*. Literally meaning “self-reliance,” *Juche* was founded to promote Korean nationalism, economic self-sustenance, and political independence. Not to mention the underlying cause to cement his divine personality cult and the glory of the Democratic People's Republic, *Juche* became the state religion.

Spread by itinerant missionaries in the form of roving statesmen, the entire population of North Korea embraced it whether they wanted to or not. It became punishable by law to deface a picture of Kim Il-sung through printer malfunction; it became punishable by law to wrap packages with or use as packing material newspapers with Kim Il-sung on it; it became punishable by law to subvert grain confiscation and avoid starvation for the Glory of the Fatherland; it became punishable by law to avoid contributing one's fair share to the community. A series of minute but capital crimes were crafted specifically to condition the North Korean people to obey *Juche* and an increasingly unloving, unyielding Big Brother figure. The religion conflagrated tremendously with the youth of the nation, but met considerable resistance from its more conservative, older crowd. Traditional communists criticized the movement for its manipulative nature, but were swiftly deported to friendship camps to be re-educated.

The Workers' Party of Korea seized all private property, nationalized all industries, and confiscated all foodstuffs to impose an indeterminate ration. Christian and western influences which had existed in Pyongyang during Japanese occupation were destroyed during the war, so the Party rebuilt the city in the image of their divine leader. What was originally a divergence of Marxist-Leninism now became a uniquely North Korean communist religion as an eternal purge of every aspect in North Korean society commenced, trying and executing former resistance heroes Lee Young-ho and Huh Bong-hak.

North Korea had become a true hermit kingdom where none could leave or enter. Following a visit to a world socialist council, Kim was criticized for rewriting history books, censoring contentious media, and promoting his strange strain of communism *Juche*. He stormed out and found himself alone in a sea of enemies. In the face of adversity, he had created Eden, but none appreciated it.

Cultural Restructuring

"Rooted deep in the minds of our women at present are the vestiges of Japanese imperialist ideology and feudal ideas. Quite a few women think a life of idleness is good, they hold labour in contempt, and envy the rich, they are reluctant to undertake social work and have no national pride. They judge people according to their family, invite a sorceress to exorcise evil spirits and consult a fortune teller. All this is a manifestation of the survivals of Japanese imperialist and feudalistic ideologies."

~ Eternal President Kim Il-sung, 1980, denouncing the perpetuation of Japanese influence on Korea

With the intent of keeping his population under tabs, Kim Il-sung greenlit a caste system in 1967 called *Songbun*, meaning "origin" or "constituent." Based upon principles of loyalty to the Party, economic and political history, and familial ties, North Koreans would be slotted into a designated hierarchy tier to live for the rest of their life. Job and school opportunities, food portions, and open housing were all affected by *Songbun*. Refusing to conform or pledge allegiance to the regime would result in a low *Songbun* status and state-delivered punishment. Rising through the tiers was possible, but only through bribery. At its inception, the program expelled 25% of the population of Pyongyang to the bottom-most caste (Christians, lawyers, and merchants made up the bulk of said tier).

Children were encouraged to snitch on disloyal family members and those who were arrested faced dire charges. They would be sent to friendship camps for the rest of their life, and depending on the severity of their treason, up to three generations of their family would be sent to friendship camps, too. Paranoia and friendlessness which first afflicted their Great Leader now became the struggle of the entire population; the law of the land..

Economic Miracle

"Arms in one hand and a hammer and sickle in the other!"

~ Party Slogan, 1962, advocating for civilian support of the military

The Workers' Party of Korea helped pass multiple far-reaching economic reforms during the middle of the Cold War. Land collectivization, state investment in heavy industry, and military build-up were all focuses of the North's early Three- and Five-Year Plans - consumer goods, however, were not. State infrastructure was a staple of order and authority for the Party as industrial sectors across the country were nationalized and a farm tax was removed. By the 1970s, the DPRK's GDP per capita was equal to that of South Korea, even with all of the South's funding from its Yankee overlords. Beyond all comprehension, Great Leader's pride and joy stood neck-and-neck with the bottomless pockets of the West.

Peninsular Interaction and the Mao-Kim Split

"The U.S.S. Pueblo was in international waters in the Sea of Japan when she was surrounded by North Korean patrol boats and boarded by an armed party... The boarding of this ship was an act of the most outrageous piracy committed by these savages known as the North Koreans. There were 83 men aboard the Pueblo when she was captured - six officers, 75 enlisted men, and two civilians. We shall never forget the Pueblo - and we shall not forget the North Koreans."

~ Congressman Mendell Rivers, 1968, referring to the USS Pueblo Incident

From 1966 to 1969, small skirmishes between the North and South occurred on the daily near the DMZ. When Kim appealed to Mao for aid in destroying the obviously puny South, he was brushed off. Mao wasn't interested in fighting a war for him again, especially as plans for instituting his own personality cult and administrative purge was entering infancy known as the Cultural Revolution. Undeterred, Great Leader went through with his plot to destabilize the South and make it susceptible to invasion - the assassination of then-president Park Chung-hee.

Seoul is but 35 miles (56 km) from the border, making it grossly accessible to DPRK special operations. On January 17, 1968, thirty expertly trained North Korean commandos infiltrated South Korea and made headway to the Blue House in Seoul, the White House equivalent for the ROK. These 30 soldiers had received two years of specialized training in stealth, exfiltration, hand-to-hand combat, and a slew of other abilities to prepare them for the worst. They were given orders to kill themselves if capture appeared a possibility, but by all means the enemy's president had to fall.

President Park Chung-hee was scheduled to be in his residence four days from their insertion, so the commandos moved swiftly to get into position. After cutting a hole through DMZ fencing and fording a shallow river, the unit disguised themselves and happened upon citizens cutting wood some distance out from the city. Rather than kill the woodcutters, the commandos approached the civilians and attempted to indoctrinate them with the ideals of *Juche* and Kim Il-sung's divinity. Believing themselves to be saviors of the South from the icy

grasp of dictator Chung-hee (he was actually more fair than Syngman Rhee and helped develop the South Korean economy), the contingent revered themselves liberators. This would prove to be their downfall. While awaiting the promised time in ditches and abandoned sheds, the “enlightened” woodcutters reported their suspicions to local soldiers who dispatched an alert to the Blue House and anticipated the North Korean infiltration. The commandos were discovered one day before the assassination was to occur, kickstarting a desperate gunfight as the operatives attempted to flee north across the border. One was captured, the other 29 killed. To deflect political ramification from the attempted assassination, Kim Il-sung acted decisively and had the North Korean Navy seize the USS Pueblo, a reconnaissance vessel, from the Sea of Japan. The Pueblo Incident topped newspaper headlines instead of the Blue House Raid, saving the DPRK from more international condemnation than they would have otherwise received.

Relations with China began to strain as well, for Mao was less than enthusiastic with the sloppy developing military record of the North. As Mao instituted his own brand of Marxist-Leninism called Maoism, Kim Il-sung ignored his calls to arms. The Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Cultural Revolution, a “cheap Chinese knock-off of *Juche*,” - Kim was determined to blaze his own communist trail and carry the torch of Stalin, not wallow in the darkness of his adversary. Mao and Kim held a lot in common, too. They both had large statues and paintings of themselves hanging around urban corners along with ultranationalist propaganda belched from megaphones at all hours of the day. As American involvement in Vietnam increased, Kim proposed a second invasion of the South, which Mao flatly rejected. Kim, upset, insulted Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Mao’s Red Guard called Kim a “fat revisionist.” Sino-North Korean ties ended there.

End of an Era (1970 - 1991)

"General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

~ President Ronald Reagan, 1987, prefacing the end of the Cold War

As the economies of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union began to wane, so too did North Korea's. Ideologically-motivated social and economic reform failed to produce any long-lasting benefits, and the North Korean economy stagnated. Quality of life, which had certainly not been on the increase in the post-war world, entered a sharp decline. Citizens struggled to get their daily bread while their brethren in the South erected monuments of glass and steel and felt the refreshing sensation of American stimulus - unbeknownst to the North's population, of course.

Final Diplomatic Endeavors

"There are a lot of things we can learn from the Soviet Union. Naturally, we should learn from its advances and not its backward experience. The slogan we have advocated all along is to draw on the advanced Soviet experience. Who told you to pick up its backward experience? Some people are so indiscriminating that they say a Russian fart is fragrant. That too is subjectivism. The Russians themselves say it stinks. Therefore, we should be analytical."

~ Chairman Mao Zedong, 1956, criticizing Kim Il-sung's Russophilia

At the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, relations between Mao and Kim normalized. Kim praised the Revolution for being an excellent idea while the Red Guard apologized for calling him fat. With the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam and the fall of Saigon in 1975 to communist forces, Kim tried for a final time to court support in attacking the South but was rebuffed. Not only did Mao refuse to help Kim, he confided that he was reopening diplomatic and economic ties with the United States, Kim's sworn enemy. PRC and DPRK diplomats did not communicate for a brief period afterward.

North Korea joined the Non-Aligned Movement in 1975 in hopes of influencing the developing third world with *Juche*, most effectively inspiring leaders like Idi Amin in Uganda, Pol Pot in Cambodia, and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya to follow his lead in building personality cults (all three of these leaders are now notorious for committing genocide against their people).

With the Soviet Union in recession and China in the back pocket of the western imperialists, North Korea had nowhere else to look but inward to create a new economy that would be self-sustaining. Kim planned a productive socialist system based on heavy industry and mining, and although feasible, would require massive investment with funds he did not possess. North Korea turned to foreign banks to acquire the necessary funds, but various resource crises in the world throttled the selling power of their excavated minerals, thus plunging the country into extreme insolvency. Simultaneously, Kim continued to greenlight public works projects like the Juche Tower and "Hotel of Doom" to retain the novelty of his personality cult, further propelling the country into economic decline.

Shifting Gears into Isolationism

"Being in a minority, even a minority of one, did not make you mad. There was truth and there was untruth, and if you clung to the truth even against the whole world, you were not mad."

~ George Orwell, 1949, in his book *1984*

In 1976, the last man Kim could call a friend died. Mao Zedong - icon, leader, and revolutionary mastermind-architect behind the People's Republic of China - died. Three years later, China instituted a series of economic reforms that better reflected American influences through privatization rather than the collectivism usually endorsed by a socialist system. North Korea proceeded to slowly cut ties with China, maintaining limited trade relations. Kim criticized the Soviet Union for becoming softer on capitalism as they cycled leaders, eventually losing not only friendship but financial aid when the conglomerate dissolved in 1991, pulling the North Korean economy into a terrifying nosedive.

The economy was failing, allies were waning, and now Great Leader's health was deteriorating. Staring enviously across the DMZ, Kim Il-sung fumed at the continued success of the "Miracle on the Han River" that was Seoul and her constituent districts. The North, which had previously been superior in finances to her brother, now fell behind. The South Korean economy blew past its northern counterpart in the late 1970s and 1980s, making the disparity quite obvious by Cold War's end which ideology was superior.

The Last Years of Eternal President Kim Il-sung

"What [Kim Il-sung] wants is my respect. And I am going to give it to him."

~ Former President Jimmy Carter, 1994, before visiting Pyongyang

Kim Jong-il, son of Kim Il-sung, was named his successor in 1984. Kim Jong-il ran the day-to-day activities of the government since the early 1990s as a result of his father's failing health. In June 1994, former president Jimmy Carter visited Pyongyang on behalf of the Clinton administration to discuss worries of a rumored North Korean pursuit for atomic weapons (in 1985, North Korea ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, but eight years later was accused of violating it). Carter left satisfied that the North not only wasn't building atomic weapons, but that it held no capacity to ever acquire them.

Three weeks later, Eternal President Kim Il-sung died of a heart attack, despite his title's immortal claim. The whole of the Democratic People's Republic stopped for a long time to mourn the loss of their god. Kim Jong-il did not become the de facto leader of North Korea until 1997 when a shadow commission was arranged to hold a presidential election. He won.

The Reign of Supreme Leader Kim Jong-il (1994 - 2011)

"Today, the Korean peninsula provides the world's clearest contrast between a society that is open and a society that is closed; between a nation that is dynamic and growing, and a government that would rather starve its people than change. It's a contrast so stark you can see it from space, as the brilliant lights of Seoul give way to the utter darkness in the north."

~ President Barack Obama, 2010, criticizing the North's failure to address its famine

International trade between the North and the outside world was cut in half during the early 1990s because of the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc. Subsidized materials from the Soviet Union like oil, metals, and some food were discontinued. In 1995 a flood destroyed crops across the country, creating a famine that would last for three long years. The government's solution? Build up the military.

Unexpected Resilience

"Glory to the heroic soldiers of the Korean People's Army!"

~ Supreme Leader Kim Jong-il, 1992, in the face of total devastation

Conditions in second-generation North Korea were gruesome. Widespread famine starved 5% of the country's population - around one million people - while the country's federal coffers were bled dry through a *Songun* policy (not to be confused with *Songbun*). Its name self-evident of its intentions, "military first" sought to protect the military instead of the general population. Many of the young who were first indoctrinated by the mysticism in *Juche* were now older and disillusioned, openly blaming Kim Jong-il's reign for creating the mass starvation. Those who did survive the starving time experienced stunted growth and frailty, many unfit to serve in the military their leader so desperately invested resources into.

As bad as things got, the North Korean people endured. The worst was over by the turn of the millennia, however, not before thousands of citizens fled to China or smuggled sustenance in. Crime, prostitution, and underground market dealings grew during the famine to help sustain families; clear imperfections in the social purity so carefully carved out by their former Great Leader.

Faith in the Fatherland

"The physical life of an individual person is limited, but the life of the masses united as an independent social-political organism is immortal... Only when an individual becomes a member of this community can he acquire the immortal social-political life."

~ Supreme Leader Kim Jong-il, 1986, conferring the secret to immortality

Many who fled for China still praised the government of their Fatherland, some even returning home to their families after they'd acquired enough money or food. Although those that left the country returned with information and (comparatively) uncensored truth from the outside, Kim Jong-il was content with letting it fester for a short while - perhaps the Chinese would have useful technology he could reappropriate.

In 1998, the Sunshine Policy was employed between the Koreas as orchestrated by President Kim Dae Jung of South Korea. It hosted summit meetings between the two, established the mutual benefit industrial area of Kaesong where some 50,000 North Koreans were employed, and organized a family reunion for victims of the Korean War, bringing relations of the two enemies within peaceful coexistence. Kim Jong-il, disgusted with this development, sought superiority. And, as they learned from the Chinese, atomic weapons are not only more practical and destructive than a conventional military, they're also cheaper.

Joining the Atomic Club and Last Gasps of Power

"The nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula arose as a result of the United States constantly threatening the sovereignty and security of our people. Sovereignty is the lifeline of a country and nation. We have possessed nuclear deterrent to protect our sovereignty from the blatant nuclear threat of the United States and its increasingly hostile policy."

~ Supreme Leader Kim Jong-il, 2011, justifying North Korean possession of atomic weapons

In 2003, North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Despite the best wishes and predictions of Jimmy Carter's visit twelve years prior, North Korea conducted an underground nuclear test in October 2006. South Korean authorities were alerted when an unnatural 3.6 magnitude earthquake was detected, verifying the test's success. North Korea had also been testing rocket technology since 1998 with a short revival from 2006 to 2007 in light of their atomic test. One of their rockets, the Taepodong-2 ICBM, boasted a range that

could strike the west coast of the United States. An unproven claim, however, as a test launch failed to get off the ground.

The atomic bomb used in their original test is thought to have been purchased from Pakistan, implying that the North didn't possess capabilities to build atomic weapons at that point in time. That belief was proved wrong, however, in 2009. Kim Jong-il, after suffering a stroke, appointed his heir and called for a nuclear test to prove North Korean strength despite his imminent death. The bomb, believed to have been crudely constructed by DPRK engineers, exploded successfully.

In 2011, Supreme Leader Kim Jong-il suffered a fatal heart attack while riding a train, immediately bringing his heir, Kim Jong-un, into power.

The Hermit Kingdom Today (2011 - 2016)

"Nothing is more precious for our people than peace, but it is not something that can be achieved if we simply crave and beg for it."

~ Glorious Leader Kim Jong-un, 2014, at a New Year's address

Here we return to the anchor point of this entire booklet: Kim Jong-un and his circus of a foreign diplomatic model. Centuries of industrial consolidation, mass starvation, cultural destruction, economic devastation, and military proliferation culminated into the reign of the most loose-cannon world leader on the global stage today. And the funniest part is he wasn't even supposed to be Glorious Leader.

An Unlikely Heir

"I have my doubts about whether a person with only two years of grooming as a leader can govern."

~ Kim Jong-nam, 2012, commenting on his half-brother's ascension to the throne

Kim Jong-il was expected to place his eldest son, Kim Jong-nam, as his heir-apparent before death. In 2001, however, he was detained by Japanese authorities while attempting to visit Disney World with a fake passport. Disgraced, Kim Jong-il set his eyes upon another one of his sons to succeed him, Kim Jong-un.

Unlike the war hero Kim Il-sung or his revered party leader son Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un was unknown to the North Korean public. As such, his first order of business as Glorious Leader was to conduct a large-scale public relations campaign to make his name familiar to all. He was but in his late 20s when he assumed power in 2011, making him the youngest world leader alive. With all the temperament and shortsightedness of an undisciplined despot, Glorious Leader was ineffective in his early years. He put forth clandestine reform to reawaken the personality cult his grandfather had created one generation ago, declaring himself the reincarnation of Eternal President Kim Il-sung. Many North Koreans whose opinions were against their new leader now turned favorable.

Additionally, the video game *Homefront* released a trailer shortly before Kim Jong-il's death predicting a series of improbable events, least of which being the death of Supreme Leader and ascension of Kim Jong-un. When these events proved true, attention turned from distant

interest to close-up fascination as gamers waited to see if the game's other predictions - that North Korea would diplomatically unify with the South and proceed to conquer Asia - would come true. They didn't.

Rekindling the Chinese Partnership

"I will be a comrade-in-arms who always shares life and death and destiny with comrades on the road of the sacred military-first revolution and will fulfill my responsibility for the fatherland and revolution by upholding Comrade Kim Jong-il's behest."

~ Glorious Leader Kim Jong-un, 2012, promising to uphold his father's will

China's government began to grow weary of North Korean refugees illegally entering their country - one billion-plus natives was already too much to worry about. Kim Jong-un cooperated with Chinese authorities to help cut down on civilian departures from the DPRK, employing tactics learned there to also cut down defections to the South down by half. North Korea, whose economy depended on China, successfully reopened negotiation and friendship with the pseudo-communist state (following Mao's death, much of the PRC's original communist reform had been reversed), giving Kim Jong-un leverage at the world negotiating table. For several years at around springtime, Kim Jong-un threatened war against the South and backed down only when given aid by the United States. He utilized this tactic numerous times to deliver food, medical supplies, and other needed extremities unto his ailing population, further cementing control. Every spring since 1948, it had been tradition for the South and United States to conduct military exercises, hence Glorious Leader's timely saber-rattling.

In 2013, North Korea conducted a third nuclear test amidst suspicions of a weakening central government. Kim Jong-un demoted, promoted, fired, and hired new military leaders to shake up management and reduce the chances of a coup against him as well. His paranoia was legitimized when in December of that same year he tried and executed his uncle, Chang Song-thaek, on charges for conspiracy of treason.

War on Poseidon... and Hollywood

"The military might of a country represents its national strength. Only when it builds up its military might in every way can it develop into a thriving country."

~ Glorious Leader Kim Jong-un, 2013, in defense of military build-up

On and off from 2012 to 2015, North Korea conducted short-range ballistic rocket launches into the Sea of Japan as a show of strength. The United Nations condemned each launch in succession but did nothing to enforce their disapproval.

In 2014 an American movie was in production called *The Interview* starring Seth Rogen and James Franco. Its plot? The assassination of Kim Jong-un. Understandably, North Korea denounced the movie for promoting terrorism against another sovereign nation - not as understandably, however, threatening to bomb theaters which played the film. Sony Pictures, the owners of *The Interview*, claimed to have been hacked by the North Korean government and so announced plans to not release the film, but Kim denied involvement. In response, North Korea entered a temporary blackout as federal American hackers performed a cyber-strike in support of the movie's release. The movie was released, and no theater bombings occurred.

Upset at the world's lackadaisical response to the movie's premise and their unjust persecution by American cyber-might, Kim Jong-un became increasingly hostile and militant, turning his belligerence up to eleven. In January 2016, North Korea tested a hydrogen bomb.

A New Age of Scrutiny

"This is an authoritarian regime. It's provocative. It has repeatedly violated U.N. resolutions, tested and produced nuclear weapons and now they are trying to perfect their missile launch system... I spoke with President Xi of China just a few days before this launch about the need to really tighten the noose on them."

~ President Barack Obama, 2016, following a North Korean satellite launch

Stepping up their rocketry capabilities, North Korea launched a satellite into the atmosphere - its ulterior motive obviously being a test in staged rockets that could later be used to carry nuclear warheads. 2016 began as a year of intense change signalled by the test of a North Korean hydrogen bomb in January. While several seismologist groups in China and South Korea agree there was indeed an unnatural earthquake and American drone data suggest the release of some nuclear content, many are apprehensive in giving the North the benefit of the doubt that they created a hydrogen bomb. Chances are, instead, that they built a dirty bomb with hydrogen components, something that would yield the measured magnitude and material. Getting a hydrogen bomb to explode requires nuclear fusion, something that appears to be just a hair beyond North Korean capability - but not far enough. Regardless, any major detonation from the DPRK is unwanted, and the United Nations threatened sanctions against the country if it didn't stop its nuclear pursuit.

In February, North Korea launched long-range missiles south of the peninsula, eventually flying over the Japanese island of Okinawa before impacting in the sea nearby. The United

Nations decided enough was enough and put its foot down in March the hardest it's ever done, issuing a unanimous international embargo against the rogue state. China, longtime ally to the DPRK by way of necessity more than pleasure, had already been in the throes of abandonment for a while, preferring business with the West over the pitiful buffer state status the Kim regime provided, failing to veto the proposal. In defiance of the sanctions, Kim Jong-un fired several missiles into the Sea of Japan, prompting additional sanctions. Russia, growing worried at the North's hawkish attitude as of late, abandoned their former ally as well, stating that if the North wanted to fight they'd have to do it on their own.

Glorious Leader's response to the devastating sanction was to announce the DPRK's perfection of miniaturized nuclear warheads - weapons capable of being attached to the tips of their rockets. China, who accounts for 57% of North Korea's imports and 42% of its exports, turned away North Korea merchant vessels attempting to dock and suspended cash transactions in the hermit kingdom, crippling the North Korean economy further than it'd already been. Kim Jong-un decided it a good move and shot himself in the foot by closing off the joint-asset Kaesong factory complex shared between it and the South, putting tens of thousands of North Koreans out of a job.

Following additional rocket launches into neighboring waters, the North released a propaganda video showing a Washington, D.C. under nuclear attack. Some years before, the North's propaganda department used footage of a burning New York City from the popular video game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*. The North Korean government was sued and lost a copyright case against Activision, owners of *Call of Duty*. Whether Kim will pay by cash or check has yet to be determined.

The End of Chinese Protection

"When looking back on our revolutionary history, not once has China been sincere towards us when our revolutionary efforts ran into challenges and struggles. Just as our great leaders have taught us, we must not have even the smallest fantasies about China. We must no longer go easy on the Chinese and instead deal with them on the same footing in order to change their attitude of taking us lightly."

~ Workers' Party of Korea Declaration, 2016, denouncing China for cooperating with the West

In mid-March 2016, North Korea abruptly announced that they would "douse China in a nuclear storm" for cooperating with the United Nations in imposing economic and military sanctions on the hermit kingdom. China officially embargoed the state and declared them a prime threat to national security, totally destroying Sino-Korean relations and removing any shred of Chinese sympathy or alliance in helping the North conquer the South.

Final Thoughts

Tackling a country as enclosed and secretive as North Korea is a daunting task, but I hope I've done the effort justice. Not many people know much about the DPRK, just that it's run by lunatics and they have nukes. Is that interpretation wrong? By its very essence, I'd say no. But to disregard the centuries of psychological and cultural strain wrought against the peninsula to figure how that would factor into the creation of an ultra-authoritarian regime is nothing short of foolishness. North Korea is a product of its environment, nothing more, nothing less.

Kim Il-sung, its first leader, was a haughty communist first and a tempered idealist second. His reforms shackled the state into its current status of infantile political religion and blind worship. His son, Kim Jong-il, flung the nation into its position as a nuclear power, putting the fear of God into its neighbors and formulating a whole heap of diplomatic stresses. And then his successor, the unlikely Kim Jong-un, pushed the "enemy of the world" boundary even further. The "axis of evil" moniker attached to the DPRK by President George W. Bush truly came to life in 2016 as the third Kim regime stepped up its atomic program and threatened invasion following its loss of former allies China and Russia.

Backed into a corner, the North Korean state has no recourse but to bite. If Kim Jong-un is to stop playing a game of I'm-not-touching-you, he will act on his big talk. Maybe not today, maybe not for months. But it's either him that commits the act that shatters the armistice at Panmunjom or a preemptive invasion for the good of the world's stability by some other power - whether it be China, the United States, or whoever.

To put things simply, North Korea was dealt a bad hand. Numerous times. Consecutively. At first it was bad luck with the Japanese occupation, and then the Soviet occupation, and then the Korean War thanks to Kim Il-sung's rampant militarism. But those days of being a victim of circumstance are over because of this established tradition of being a ruthless, barbaric, outcast. The only way for reunification to occur between the two Koreas is for the fall of the Kim regime - even if North Korea persists after a coup, it will still be a better path than the hereditary belligerence of its first three leaders.

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