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Andrei Lankov/Crisis in North Korea

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Introduction

FOR THE COMMUNIST CAMP, the mid-1950s were years of great importance. These few years altered forever the political, social, and cultural landscape of most Communist countries and changed the meaning of the term “World Communism.” For us—recent witnesses to the far more spectacular collapse of the Communist system in the early 1990s—the changes of this earlier period might appear less impressive than they would have at the time. Nevertheless, in the 1950s these transformations were indeed substantial, and they determined the direction of the “Communist bloc” for the next few decades. Indeed, the mid-1950s created a framework within which the Communist camp continued to function until its demise in 1989–1991.

To a large extent these changes were driven by the de-Stalinization campaign in the Soviet Union. Nikita Khrushchev launched this campaign in a somewhat hectic attempt to create a new, more humane model of Leninist socialism, and by the mid-1950s it was gaining momentum. Khrushchev and his supporters wanted reform, but their reform plan had one important caveat: the party must remain in permanent control—both domestically, in the Soviet Union, and internationally, in the other Communist states of Europe and Asia. These controversial developments in Moscow were rapidly changing the entire face of the Communist world, which comprised at that time some dozen countries in Eastern Europe and East Asia. The reactions to the challenge of de-Stalinization in the hitherto solidly uniform and strictly

controlled Communist camp were varied and mixed. In some countries the local elite chose to follow Moscow's footsteps and eventually created—or rather, imported—a more liberal post-Stalinist version of state socialism, albeit still very restrictive and occasionally repressive. In other countries the local leaders did not follow suit; either they embarked on more radical experiments and distanced themselves even further from the original Stalinist model, or they struggled even harder to preserve the old patterns and, in the process of doing so, occasionally proved themselves more Stalinist than Stalin. These two latter approaches appeared and indeed were quite different. Nonetheless, liberal reformers and “national Stalinist” conservatives were, in a sense, performing the same function: they were dissolving the prescribed uniformity of early Communism and undermining the once unbreakable domination of the movement by Moscow. The Communist world changed irrevocably during the mid-1950s; in fact one could argue that after this period there was no longer a coherent “Communist world.”

The uncertainty and doubt among the rulers filtered down to the ruled and triggered riots and revolts on a scale hitherto unknown in the Communist world. In 1956 in Hungary and Poland the people, under nationalist and/or democratic slogans, openly challenged their Communist governments, and in the case of Hungary only the large-scale Soviet intervention prevented the popular insurrection from overthrowing the local Communist government. Elsewhere substantially different ideas inspired the rebels: during the less known but bloody events in Soviet Georgia, Stalin's own homeland, local youth rioted to protest the new policy of de-Stalinization and to protect the “honor” of the deceased leader, whom they perceived to be their great compatriot and benefactor. Still, until 1956 open revolt had been simply unthinkable in most circumstances, and if it did occur, as it did in Germany in 1953, it was promptly and decisively suppressed.

Of these few pivotal years, 1956 can be singled out as an “*annus mirabilis*” (or “*annus miserabilis*,” depending on the individual's political taste). It was the year of the Soviet Twentieth Congress; the year of Khrushchev's “Secret Speech” and official denunciation of Stalin; the year of the Hungarian uprising; the year of the Polish riots and strikes; a year of increasing tensions in China; and the year of the first Soviet-

Yugoslav reconciliation. For many Communist states the politics, problems, and achievements of the ensuing decades had their genesis in events of the mid-1950s. After 1956 the earlier uniformity of the Communist camp disappeared forever, and the original “Communist monolith” no longer existed.

North Korea was no exception. The mid-1950s were an important turning point. In 1953 the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) emerged from the Korean War as an especially poor but otherwise unremarkable “people’s democracy,” still supervised and sponsored by Moscow. It had some peculiar characteristics, but by and large it remained firmly within the Moscow-approved framework of a “people’s democracy.” This situation was to change quickly, however. It is a well-known fact that North Korea—together with Albania, Romania, and China—was one of the few Communist regimes to reject the new Moscow line (with varying degrees of radicalism) and to remain more or less loyal to the old Stalinist pattern, a pattern that was increasingly reinforced with fierce nationalistic rhetoric. This new political course of “independent Stalinism” became more obvious after 1960, but its foundations were laid in the period 1955–1960.

Of the many important events that took place in North Korea in the mid-1950s, the abortive attempt to replace Kim Il Song in August 1956 and the subsequent impact on North Korean society is of particular interest. This attempt was a major milestone in the country’s political history. It marked the end of the early North Korean power structure and the birth of Pyongyang’s version of “national Stalinism.” The “August events” were to become the only known open challenge to Kim’s supremacy from within the North Korean political system in the almost half-century reign of the “Great Leader.” The open rebellion of high-level cadres was made possible by an excited and more confident atmosphere common in the Communist capitals of the mid-50s, a time known as “the thaw.” A general feeling of impending change, a vague but powerful hope for a better society, and the eventual development of a more dignified and less repressive kind of socialism mixed with a lingering uncertainty among the populace and eruptions of adventurous opportunism from top party dignitaries. The motives of those who joined the expanding ranks of the reformers differed quite markedly—

from nationalist fervor to leftist idealism and political careerism. Nevertheless, the reformers were united in their rejection of the old Stalinist ways, which were seen as immoral, inefficient, or both. This atmosphere threatened recently established regimes and their leaders from Warsaw to Pyongyang. Some fell, while others remained in power. Kim Il Song and his group survived the challenge. Not only was he able to continue his former policies, but he also began to steer the country in a new direction, one that differed significantly from the political course followed by a majority of the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe.

In terms of international relations, the failure of the August opposition and the eventual fiasco of an abortive Sino-Soviet political intervention demonstrated that Kim Il Song had consolidated his position and was no longer the puppet of foreign powers. It also indicated that under the new dispensation, Moscow had neither the wish nor the power to impose its will on the easternmost (and, at that time, one of the most remote) of its clients. After 1956, Kim Il Song began to cautiously, yet persistently, cast off the shackles of Soviet-Chinese tutelage. He also started to get rid of some Soviet-style policies that had been imposed on his country. The "imported Stalinism" of the late 1940s began its gradual transformation into "independent Stalinism." This process was visible before the 1956 crisis, but it was greatly facilitated by those dramatic events. The coeval gradual rupturing of relations between Moscow and Peking also meant more diplomatic opportunities and more space in which to maneuver. Once Kim Il Song had ensured domestic support, he could use these opportunities to his own advantage. Internationally, the North Korean policy of maintaining an equal distance from the two Communist giants began in the mid-1950s, although it took a few years for this policy to mature. This policy had manifold consequences, the most important of which was North Korea's ability to avoid direct involvement on either side in the Sino-Soviet schism.

The outcome of the 1956 crisis in North Korea was even more important domestically. It was a personal victory for Kim Il Song, and his reign eventually became the longest in the history of the entire Communist world, concluding with an unprecedented dynastic succession. However, the crisis was not only about personal power. Its outcome

also determined the peculiar direction of North Korean development over the following decades and laid the political foundations for the creation of a distinctive Pyongyang brand of Stalinist state socialism, later known as *chuch'e* socialism. The term "*chuch'e*" (in the later North Korean sense) was coined by the North Korean leader on December 28, 1955, in the midst of his offensive against the Soviet Koreans, on the eve of the pivotal year. Prior to 1956–1957, North Korea had been quite a typical "people's democracy," in many respects not unlike similar regimes in Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe.

However, in the aftermath of the events of 1956–1957, North Korea gradually transformed itself into a much more idiosyncratic Communist state. It became a tightly controlled and extremely militarized state devoted to a fanatical personality cult and a particular type of ideology far removed from "orthodox" Marxism-Leninism, even in its Stalinist form. Eventually these changes resulted in *chuch'e's* replacing Marxism-Leninism as the official ideology of the state. These changes also led to a significant degree of independence from Soviet (and Chinese) control and interference, but this independence was not transformed into any meaningful material or social gain for the country's long-suffering population. With the wisdom of hindsight, we know that the entire project of state socialism was economically inefficient, even ruinous, but the degree of inefficiency varied greatly within its various incarnations. Unfortunately, North Korea opted for a particularly hopeless variety of this generally inept concept. As a result of the changes in North Korean society in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Pyongyang elite established themselves as masters of their country's destiny, while the common populace gained virtually nothing at all.

The main task of this present work is to track the developments that led to an open clash within the North Korean leadership in August 1956, to provide a detailed picture of what came to be called the "August group," and to investigate the history of subsequent developments, as well as to study the impact these events had on North Korean politics and society. In doing so, I investigate how North Korean "national Stalinism" was brought into the world. Given the nature of the currently available sources, the focus is necessarily and unavoidably on old-fashioned political history. This is a common problem in studies of

North Korean history; the field still suffers heavily from a severe shortage of source material. It will be many years, if not many decades, before an in-depth study of North Korean social, cultural, or intellectual history will become possible. Such an endeavor requires access to a large amount of primary sources, currently completely unavailable, as well as careful preliminary work that would lay the foundation for further studies. Nevertheless, whenever material was available and relevant to the thrust of the arguments, I have discussed some of the important changes in North Korean society and culture.