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Peasants and Communism: Communist Policies Toward Peasants in the Soviet Union and North Korea

Cassandra Schachenmeyer

Peasants often have been the last class in society to be included within a new political, economic, or social system. Such a concept is especially true regarding communism. When faced with the peasantry, Marxist ideology does not specifically describe them; therefore, it leaves practitioners of the ideology to deal with them as they see fit. Two communist regimes that have shown significant differences in the relationship with their peasant populations are those of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea). Peasants in the Soviet Union rejected the Bolshevik's harsh implementation of Marxist communism and protested (often times violently) against the change. When compared to the Soviet Union peasantry, the DPRK peasants were in favor of implementing communism in their state. However, their support does not mean that the DPRK peasants fared well in this system.

This paper will discuss the peasants' reactions in the Soviet Union and the DPRK, as well as the two regimes' approaches to the application of communism. Although peasants in the DPRK, like those in the Soviet Union, also ultimately suffered great hardships under the communist regime, they gained significantly greater amounts of support from the regime than did those in the Soviet Union during Lenin's Bolshevik control thanks to Confucian traditions, anticolonial nationalism, and the DPRK's founder Kim Il Sung.¹

PEASANTS IN THE SOVIET UNION

The communist ideology created by Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels describes a society that is free from capitalism, class struggle, and private ownership of property. In order to achieve a perfect socialist society, Marx and Engels demanded the abolition of all private property through revolution in order for all members of the society to be equal and receive what they require to survive and thrive under communism.² Lenin expected communism to eventually improve the standard of living for all those living in Russia, and in order to achieve equality classes needed to dissolve. Along with other existing classes, Lenin needed to address the issue of the peasant class's integration into communism. However, he did not want to rely on the traditional culture and capitalist nature of the peasants to start a world-wide communist revolution, so he was anticipating the peasants' gradual absorption into the class of the "rural proletariat," as Marx and Engels stated in their *Communist Manifesto*.³ As a result, Lenin mirrored Marx by not considering peasants an essential part of the socialist revolution, often calling them "small

¹ Note on the Romanization of Korean: I will be using the Revised Romanization of Korean system to convert words originally in Korean, except when I quote an author that uses an alternative spelling. Additionally, some North Korean words or names (like Kim Il Sung) may neither follow the Revised system (Gim Ilseong) nor the McCune-Reischauer system (Kim Il-sŏng).

² Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels. *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Marx/Engels Selected Works, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1, (1848): 22.

³ *Ibid.*, 63.

peasants.”⁴ According to Vladimir Zenzinov, Marxists believed peasants were merely a “class of petty bourgeoisie, alien and antagonistic not only to Socialist ideals but to all social progress.”⁵ Peasants were not highly favored in Lenin’s revolutionary process and were often considered revolutionary road-blocks.

However, peasants were already engaged in activity that resembled a commune called the *mir*. The *mir* was a self-governing body of peasants who maintained control of local land. This system was created in order to maintain a local administration and remained a prominent system even after serfdom was abolished in 1861.⁶ The *mir* traditionally kept the peasants in a commune mindset and seemed to have potential to be supportive of the incoming communist regime. However, the *mir* did not reflect the communism Marx described or Lenin envisioned; capitalism was still present among the peasantry. As the development of a middle class emerged, peasants were now required to pay more money for the acquisition of land, and their land was often emancipated by landlords.⁷ Instead of taking advantage of the traditional peasant commune, the Soviet Marxists disregarded their traditions and forced them to comply with communist ideals.

Despite this crucial mistake, Lenin did not entirely disregard the peasants when setting the stage for communist revolution. He appealed to the peasants with the slogan; “Land, Peace and Bread,” which included three policies that he believed would satisfy the peasants in order for revolution to take place.⁸ Agrarian reform, the first of the three, intended to remove the land from the landlords, and redistribute it evenly to establish equality.⁹ Not surprisingly, this decree was widely popular among the peasants. The decree on peace facilitated Russia’s withdraw from the First World War. Lenin was a defeatist, which was the best strategy for a revolution to occur because of the higher possibility of revolution as the result of losing the war. Among the peasants, this decree was also popular as peasants made up the majority of common soldiers, and they were not concerned with losing territory.¹⁰ Bread in the slogan was merely used as a blanket term for equality and was mainly directed towards workers. Bread would be the result of a successful communist revolution where all property would be nationalized under a centrally planned economy.¹¹

The revolution of October 26, 1917 began as a coup against the tsar carried out by the Bolshevik party. The goal of the revolution was to eliminate the provisional government and establish Bolshevik rule in the Soviet Union.¹² The revolution was successful and the first decree of Lenin’s slogan was implemented immediately. Peasants initially celebrated their new allotments of land and were pleased with this reform. However, due to the civil war that lasted

⁴ Ibid., 22, 29, 49.

⁵ Vladimir Zenzinov. “The Bolshevik and the Peasant.” *Foreign Affairs* 4, no. 1 (1925): 134.

⁶ Carol Lilly. “Lecture on Soviet History” (lecture, University of Nebraska – Kearney, Kearney, NE, spring 2016).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

from 1918-1921, the peace that was promised did not come. Furthermore, in 1918, Lenin and the Bolsheviks still needed to fulfil the bread decree that would later enrage even the poorest peasantry. He intended to do so with one demand: grain requisition.

In order to feed the soldiers engaged in civil war, more grain needed to be acquired, whether it existed or not. Lenin demanded all of the grain the peasants produced, and then some. The results of this policy were far from successful. Because the peasants wanted to keep the grain they produced on their land, they responded with refusal to sell grain and hid it in bins or underground.¹³ Those who refused to sell their grain were labeled a *kulak* (“tight-fisted”). Lenin absolutely detested the kulaks and called them “bloodsuckers, vampires, plunderers of the people and profiteers,” and those “who fatten on famine.”¹⁴ Exploitative rich peasants were the ones to receive this label the most, but Lenin used this term openly for anyone who kept grain from the state. The Bolshevik government deprived anyone labeled a kulak of rights such as voting or participating in government decisions.¹⁵ Additionally, the majority of the kulaks were severely beaten or killed and hung publicly to instill fear in the rest of the peasants who resisted the Bolshevik regime.¹⁶ The Food Supply Army was created to enforce acquisition and distribution of surplus grain and the purging of kulaks. The Food Supply Army officials took peasants as hostages until the amount of grain required was delivered; however, most of the grain later spoiled due to the lack of transportation.¹⁷

Peasant discontentment blossomed into multiple uprisings and rebellions throughout the summer months of 1918 and into the middle of 1921. From January to June of 1919, they staged one rebellion after another, which plainly showed the Bolsheviks the bloody results of the peasants’ anger. The main causes of this discontentment were the policies Lenin implemented in demanding grain along with requiring peasants to join the Red Army during the civil war. Finally, the frustrated peasants rebelled against these acquisitions in cities such as Samara, Simbirsk, Kazan, and Orenburg, along several other Ural provinces.¹⁸ The civil war and uprisings proved to Lenin the peasants could not be trusted; therefore, the regime largely disregarded the severity of the rebellions and did not make an effort to resolve the issue peacefully.

Peasants in the Soviet Union were not included in the beginnings of the communist transition. They only experienced the results of the decisions made by the Bolsheviks. Vladimir Zenzinov accurately describes the results of the Bolshevik policy on the peasantry:

In a country where the peasant population is in a huge majority, no policy can be effectual that is not based on peasant interests. To be sure, the Bolsheviks understood this somewhat late, namely after their “dictatorship of the proletariat”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Vladimir Lenin. “Comrade Workers, Forward to The Last, Decisive Fight! (1918),” *Lenin’s Collected Works*, Progress Publishers 28, (1965): 53-57.

¹⁵ Taisia Osipova. “Peasant Rebellions: Origin, Scope, Dynamics, and Consequences,” in *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society*, Vladimir Borovkin ed., (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1997), 156.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

(which, essentially, has never been anything but a dictatorship of the Communist Party) had ruined the peasant.¹⁹

Ultimately, land distribution and the Soviet withdrawal out of the First World War momentarily satisfied two of the decrees made by Lenin: land and peace, but did not follow through with the Red Army draft campaign and grain acquisition.²⁰ As a result, the Soviet Union peasantry was not as receptive to the implementation of communism as they might have been if Lenin supported them.

PEASANTS IN THE DPRK

In contrast, the DPRK made an effort to include the peasantry in their plan to establish a communist regime. The DPRK learned from the mistakes of the Bolshevik government and was determined not to follow the same path. In the long run, the peasants did not fare any better in the DPRK than they did in the Soviet Union, but the DPRK peasants transitioned much more easily due to factors that laid the foundation for communism.

Marxism easily integrated itself among the DPRK peasants thanks to Confucianism's prominence in pre-modern Korea. Jiyoung Song observes that "collective spirit and selflessness" and "social harmony" were already present in order to organize Koreans into a collective labor force to establish a stable economy and military.²¹ Additionally, Confucian society describes a leader's role as "caring for people's material conditions more than anything else."²² Already, the rulers of the Joseon dynasty and those before took those characteristics into high consideration. Thus, Confucian values formed the foundation for how Kim Il Sung, the forefather of the DPRK, would lead the newly formed nation.

The Korean peninsula, formally established as a country in 2333 B.C.E. as Gojoseon, possesses a history richly detailed by Gojoseon scholars and their Chinese neighbors. The people who lived there were highly homogenized and had developed their society with little influence from other countries, save China.²³ Due to its geographical location, the temperate climate of this peninsula bordering Northeast China allowed for its development as a predominantly agrarian society. Agriculture was the driving force in the development of politics, economy, and culture among Koreans.²⁴ Peasants, who made up the majority of the population, contributed to a large portion of the economy with agriculture.²⁵ The land offered a wide variety of crops and resources at their disposal. From tropical citrus fruit on southern island territories to hardy roots and

¹⁹ Vladimir Zenzinov. "The Bolshevik and the Peasant," 141.

²⁰ Taisia Osipova. "Peasant Rebellions," 156.

²¹ Jiyoung Song. "How Communist is North Korea? From the Birth to the Death of Marxist Ideas of Human Rights," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 23, no. 4 (2010): 578.

²² *Ibid.*, 580.

²³ Michael J. Seth. *A Concise History of Modern Korea: From the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 17.

²⁴ Michael J. Seth. *A History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 200, 201.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

minerals in the northern provinces, Korea displayed an abundance that was continually sought after by foreign envoys and invaders.

Until the mid-1870s, Koreans abstained from trading with foreigners. However, before opening up to the world, China had already influenced Korea immensely with the introduction of Confucianism, a philosophical ideology centered on the ethical-sociopolitical teachings of the Chinese philosopher Kongfuzi, or Confucius (551–479 BC).²⁶ Confucianism promoted ideas such as humility, hierarchy, faithfulness to leaders, nationalism, and community. Although only practiced among the elite, Confucianism fully developed after the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392 AD) and became increasingly evident among peasantry during the Joseon dynasty as Neo-Confucianism (1392-1910).²⁷ Not long after Confucianism became the national ideology of Korea, questions regarding the metaphysical origins of man developed; therefore, Neo-Confucianism integrated religions such as Buddhism and Taoism in order to satisfy these questions.²⁸ By practicing Neo-Confucianism, rulers could maintain a secular political ideology while having their questions about creation and afterlife answered.

In addition to standard Neo-Confucianism, indigenous Koreans also practiced Donghak (Eastern Learning).²⁹ The Donghak ideology was founded in 1860 by Choe Je-u who emphasized that this religion would be specific to the Korean civilization in order to distinguish itself from foreign thought.³⁰ The Donghak followers were the most nationalistic and revolutionary members of the Neo-Confucian ideology. Donghak followers; namely, the poor peasants and lower-class citizens, often advocated for land reform, fairer distribution of wealth, and social equality while using Confucian elements to appeal to the elites.³¹ Above all, these followers were disturbed about the rising influence of foreign ideology, especially westernization, and committed to organizing a revolution to make their concerns known.

Before opening up to the outside world, the Korean governmental system believed that western influences, specifically Christianity, were detrimental to Neo-Confucian beliefs in that they would “undermine the political and social order.”³² Additionally, countries continually wished to open up ports with Korea, sometimes forcefully. After several attempts from Malaysia, Britain, France, Germany, and the United States to open up Korean borders, in 1876, Japan was the first to sign an agreement called the Treaty of Ganghwa with the stubborn peninsula.³³ In the treaty, Korea was now recognized as “an independent state possessing the same sovereign rights as Japan.”³⁴ Thus began the opening of Korea to the international world; however, the treaty also

²⁶ Ibid., 55.

²⁷ Ibid., 131

²⁸ Ibid., 121.

²⁹ Jiyong Song, "How Communist is North Korea? From the Birth to the Death of Marxist Ideas of Human Rights," 561.

³⁰ Hang-seob Bae. "Foundations for the Legitimation of the Donghak Peasant Army and Awareness of a New Political Order." *Acta Koreana* 16, no. 2, (2013): 402.

³¹ Ibid., 414.

³² Michael J. Seth. *A Concise History of Modern Korea*, 10.

³³ Ibid., 13.

³⁴ Ibid.

resulted in the development of nationalist tensions between Korea and Japan leading up to the 1900s due to the nationalistic nature of the Donghak peasants.

By working with Japan along with China after its initial opening, Korea was not too far out of its conservative Neo-Confucian and Donghak ideology by remaining in the East. However, reforms suggested by China and Japan to Korea did not appeal to most nationalistic peasants. As these reforms mostly consisted of opening more ports, they allowed both China and Japan to send their military into the peninsula. Officers and military officials, especially from Japan, began exercising too much power by reaping too many resources from the peasantry. These agitations by Japan began a series of uprisings that would bring Koreans closer to adopting Marxist ideology.

In 1894, the Donghak Peasant Uprising was launched as a result of tensions against the Japanese. With approximately 4,000 peasants united, they tried to drive out all foreign influences and eliminate inequality between peasants and the governing class.³⁵ In the peasants' "Manifesto," Confucian embellishments were inserted to justify their actions to harmonize themselves with the original Korean government. They explained that the current state of the Western, Chinese, and Japanese-influenced government was "driving the people—the foundation of the nation—into misery."³⁶ Although the Donghak Peasant Army practiced Confucianism, demanding a fairer distribution of wealth was not wholly consistent with Confucian ideology. The peasants had come to realize that they were being exploited by the governing class and used Confucianism in order to gain more support from the Korean government for the revolution.³⁷ Therefore, although the Donghak were not practicing pure Confucianism, the tradition was clearly deeply rooted in the peasant mindset.³⁸ Later, the communist supporters and Kim Il Sung would use these Confucian traditions to satisfy the interests of the peasantry as well.

Since the uprising continued for a year, the Korean government was greatly intimidated and called on the assistance of China, which sent troops to Korea to combat the uprising. Japan, which had originally planned to take control of the peninsula, became offended because China did not inform Japan of its actions. As a result, Japan sent 400 marines to the city of Incheon that moved onto Seoul, and then 3,000 more four days later in order to "bring about change in the Korean government."³⁹ The Donghak followers reacted strongly against the foreign infiltrations and began refusing to listen to the foreign elites in a peaceful uprising. Unknowingly; therefore, the Donghak Peasant Uprising triggered what would later be known as the Sino-Japanese war, setting the stage for Japanese colonization of the Korean peninsula. In the course of choking out the uprising, the Japanese harshly persecuted those Donghak peasants who had rebelled against the government. Even today, this rebellion is held in high esteem by North Koreans due to the revolutionary power of the peasantry in opposition to the Japanese forces. Kim Il Sung made the significance of this uprising known in his memoirs:

³⁵ Bae Hang-seob. "Foundations for the Legitimation of the Donghak Peasant Army," 403, 407.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 405.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 406, 414.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 407.

³⁹ Michael J. Seth. *A History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present*, 245.

I considered the rebellion of the Donghak followers as a great event, which adorned the modern history of our people's struggle against aggression and feudality, and the heroes of the war produced were eagles exerting great influence upon the political and mental life of the Korean nation in modern times.⁴⁰

According to Kim Il Sung, Donghak “consistently advocated patriotism and love of the people ideologically and in the practice, and was widely propagated and had a strong permeability.”⁴¹ Quotes such as these were later used to inspire nationalism among the peasantry in the DPRK. The Donghak Peasant Rebellion and its connection to Confucianism is considered a significant event in DPRK history and helped mobilize peasant support for communism. Just as important for solidifying peasant support for communism were its connections to efforts to rebel against the Japanese both during and after the colonial era.

After the Donghak uprising, the Japanese occupied Korea for a period of 35 years from 1910-1945. During the Japanese colonial era, the peasants of Korea suffered enormous oppression as the Japanese aspired to eliminate Korean ideology, culture, and tradition, replacing them with Japanese elements. In the first nine years of colonial rule, the Japanese were quite ruthless in their colonization process. Today, Koreans refer to this time as the “dark period” (*amhukki*), due to the harsh political oppression they experienced.⁴² At that time, the entire current Korean government was unexpectedly replaced with a Japanese system called the Government-General of Korea (*Chōsen Sōtokufu*).⁴³ This was a highly centralized force where the Japanese emperor and prime minister possessed a broad authority, “including the right to issue laws, ordinances, and regulations and to appoint various officials.”⁴⁴ More than half of the members of this government were from Japan, and the amount of Korean participation declined steadily as the occupation continued. In addition, all of these government officials were members of the Japanese military, which created an atmosphere of being in an endless war. The Japanese military possessed authority over numerous regulations and projects. They facilitated road construction and maintenance, determined health guidelines and administration, acted as public information officers, organized irrigation and water control, collected taxes, and they also had the authority to condemn all citizens of the Korean peninsula.⁴⁵ They repeatedly intimidated Korean peasants with their power and instituted major repercussions for minor crimes, such as stealing food or disrespect.

When Japan colonized Korea, acquisition of land was the main issue that directly affected Korean peasants. Due to their high interest in Korean agriculture and resources, the Japanese conducted the first of many extensive surveys of land shortly after colonization. Survey teams

⁴⁰ Kim, Il-Sung. “On Cheondoism, a National Religion” in *With the Century. Workers' Party of Korea Publishing House and Foreign Languages Publishing House and Korean Friendship Association, 1992-2007.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Michael J. Seth. *A Concise History of Modern Korea.* 45

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

were sent throughout the peninsula to inspect every type of land and who owned it. At times, Korean farmers would not be able to produce a formal document stating that they were the owners of the land.⁴⁶ Due to their traditions of communal farming, peasants often only partially owned the land along with other peasants in the surrounding area. As a result, most peasants were unable to keep their land. The Japanese continued to harass Koreans until, finally, on March 1st, 1919, the Koreans fought back.

The March First Movement of 1919 was a turning point for Koreans during the time of colonization. As Kim Il Sung described it, “All the pent up angers and sorrows of living under the Japanese imperialist... exploded on that day.”⁴⁷ The Koreans realized their identity as Koreans and used this opportunity to mobilize and resist the Japanese occupation seeking to bring about independence for their country. The March First Movement involved 500,000 to 1 million peasants, women, and urban and small-town residents.⁴⁸ Although there was some recorded violence in these protests, most of the demonstrations remained peaceful.⁴⁹ However, the Japanese occupants aggressively disbanded all forms of political protests with arrests, tortures, and murder regardless of the presence of violence.⁵⁰ While the results of this movement did not produce independence for Koreans, it did embarrass the Japanese government, which called for reforms that would appease the peasantry. Many of the reforms allowed for more liberal intelligence activity among Koreans, but the Japanese still maintained a tight control on the Koreans’ freedom.

During the 1920s, a cultural split between ideologies developed. Some Koreans became more interested in Western ideology, while others were inspired by the Soviet Union, which at that time hoped to bring communism to Korea. The latter regarded the Japanese colonization as a “loss of sovereignty... [and] a great tragedy” and planned more anti-Japanese movements inspired by the Donghak uprising.⁵¹ During this period, communism was introduced through organizations that developed in the Soviet Union and Manchuria. Manchuria had become a safe haven for Korean peasants and communist supporters from the Japanese colonization.⁵² It was there that Kim Il Sung began his involvement in the communist front. Peasant organizations such as the Korean People’s Socialist Party, the Korean Bolshevik Party, and the Red Peasant Union emphasized anti-Japanese nationalism and organized peasant cooperatives.⁵³ When those organizations were disbanded due to lack of support and demoralization by the Japanese, new peasant guerilla organizations, led by Kim Il Sung and his followers, gained support by stressing general education and agricultural cooperation in addition to anti-Japanese nationalism. Through these organizations, Kim Il Sung gained knowledge, experience, and favor from the anti-

⁴⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁷ Kim Il Sung, “Long Live Korea!” in *With the Century*.

⁴⁸ Michael J. Seth. *A Concise History of Modern Korea*, 48.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 51.

⁵² Charles Armstrong. *North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950*. (Cornell University Press, 2004), 32.

⁵³ Ibid., 40.

Japanese peasantry in Manchuria and would later use their support to bring communism to the peninsula.

In 1939, the Second World War fostered the nationalism needed for Kim Il Sung to persuade the peasantry toward communism. Japan continuously pushed for the annexation of Korea, claiming that there needed to be “harmony between Japan and Korea.”⁵⁴ Attempting to establish that harmony, Japan introduced new technologies that aided in the industrialization of Korea, which is one of the few benefits of the colonization. However, much of what Japan did during the war – from purging Korean traditions and cultures to changing Korean names to Japanese ones – did not profit Koreans. Although Japan implemented all of these policies, Korea was far from being assimilated into Japanese culture. In actuality, the uneducated peasantry could not speak nor read Japanese, and did not mix well among the Japanese who were living there.⁵⁵ As a result, the anger and shame grew among Korean peasants, creating the nationalism required for revolution.

After the announcement made on August 15th, 1945 of the Japanese surrender, many Koreans experienced a period of euphoria. Koreans gradually removed all traces of Japanese symbols and began reestablishing their own culture. Koreans attempted to institute a new government in their liberation called the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence (CPKI) headed by Cho Man-sik, a local leader endorsed by the Soviet regime.⁵⁶ The initial goal of this governing body was to aid in keeping peace after liberation. However, most of the peace-keeping remained in the southern half of the peninsula and did not affect the northern provinces. The Soviet Union, seeing a window of opportunity, began taking interest in the northern provinces and devising a strategy to introduce communism into the entire Korean peninsula.

The Soviet troops under Joseph Stalin began to enter the northeast section of the Korea as the war came to a close while most of the American troops remained in Okinawa. Seeing the Soviet forces taking advantage of the vulnerability of Korea, American military forces became increasingly concerned by the implications of communist influence. Even before the liberation day, the United States hurriedly worked to divide the peninsula during the night of August 10-11th in order to separate Soviet and United States occupational territory.⁵⁷ In order to keep the peninsula, which acted as a bridge during many conflicts in history, from falling into the hands of the Soviets, Harry Truman accepted the division proposed along the 38th parallel and sent it to Moscow.⁵⁸ Surprisingly, the Soviets accepted this division despite their desire to occupy the entire peninsula. The division was not determined by geographical, cultural, or historical factors, nor were Koreans involved in determining this division.

Not long after Japanese surrender, Soviet troops under Joseph Stalin entered into Pyongyang (approximately 190km from the parallel) on August 24th, 1945. At the same time, communist People’s Committees (PCs) were spreading by the peasantry throughout the

⁵⁴ Michael J. Seth. *A History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present*, 296.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁵⁶ Michael J. Seth. *A Concise History of Modern Korea*. 87.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

countryside. In the northern provinces of Korea, these PCs consisted of peasants known as “conservative nationalists.”⁵⁹ They were fully supported by Stalin, who was trying to make them more pro-Soviet. When the Soviet Red Army entered Korea, they established bureaus of local commanders known as *komendaturas* in order to further drive out Japanese colonial elements and organize at the provincial, township, and national levels.⁶⁰ Because the Soviets were seen as responsible for eliminating Japanese colonization, support for them substantially increased, especially north of the parallel. The USSR offered shelter and assistance for the Japanese-abused partisans, even if this meant Kim Il Sung’s army would be absorbed into the Soviet Army.⁶¹ The Soviet forces helped form the foundation to support the communists of the north. Independence and the liberation from Japan were the main goals of the Soviet Union and Kim Il Sung, which gained the support of multitudes of the nationalistic peasantry.

In October of 1945, Kim Il Sung replaced Cho Man-sik as the leader for establishing a communist rule in Korea thanks to his Manchurian experience and communist zeal. Kim Il Sung in the newly formed People’s Revolutionary Government of North Korea emphasized the nationalistic desire of the peasants for the land to be taken from the Japanese and returned to the them. In addition to installing Kim Il Sung as the communist head in Korea, Soviet forces also implemented such progressive measures as the implementation of free and compulsory education, regulation of labor, and land reform.⁶² Not surprisingly, out of all of these, land reform gained the most popular support from the Korean peasantry. Having been subjected to land requisition by the Japanese, the Korean peasants were interested in being returned the land that they had traditionally held before the colonization.

In February 1946, the North Korean Interim People's Committee was established in Pyongyang with the help of the Soviet Union and created articles that addressed issues that developed after the Japanese colonization. One of the first declarations made against the Japanese was on the account of former Japanese-owned land:

Preparations [will] be made to dispose of, within a short period, the land and forests confiscated from the Japanese aggressors and pro-Japanese reactionary elements. Land and forests subject to confiscation from Korean landlords will be nationalised, the land-tenant system will be abolished, and the land will be distributed to the peasants without compensation.⁶³

These ordinances promised that the peasants would potentially receive all the land that was originally in their possession. In addition to all land that was previously owned by Japanese imperialists, national traitors, and Korean landowners with more than 2.45 acres in possession, any farm equipment, animals, or homes formerly owned by peasants should be confiscated

⁵⁹ Charles Armstrong. *North Korean Revolution*. 50.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶² Chong-sik Lee. “Land Reform, Collectivisation and the Peasants in North Korea.” *The China Quarterly* 14 (1963): 66.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 64.

without compensation and redistributed back without any payment required by landless peasants or peasants with little land.⁶⁴ Any land that was not taken by the peasantry would be transferred to state ownership.

At first, the peasants were skeptical of this offer because they could not understand how the government could confiscate land without any compensation to the Japanese, but their excitement and curiosity exceeded their concern. As the land was slowly taken from the Korean landlords, they became suspicious of the implications of their land confiscation; therefore, most of them fled south of the 38th parallel. The joint Soviet/North Korean support offered many land benefits to the peasantry in order to gain favor for the implementation of communism. Compared to the southern half of the peninsula, the north was highly organized and promised a better future and purpose because of the Soviet Union's backing. Finally, the Korean communist party cemented its support among the peasantry by giving them what they most wanted: land.

However, the main goal of Kim Il Sung's Korea was to govern a people free from the occupation of foreigners. Born to peasant origins during the Japanese colonial era, Kim Il Sung was easily able to relate to the peasants and highly considered them as he was building the DPRK.⁶⁵ Kim Il Sung developed a new ideology that was unique only to the DPRK: *juche*. This ideology of self-reliance draws in all aspects of traditional Korean culture (specifically Confucianism), nationalism, and emphasis on military that was needed to attract peasant interest.⁶⁶ At first, Kim Il Sung welcomed Soviet and Chinese assistance, but after the occupation from Japan, he realized his desire for self-reliance and no foreign influence. Korean nationalism was too high to rely on foreign assistance any longer; therefore, *juche* became the most important foundation for gaining support of the peasants in the communist DPRK. Also, with the increasing occupation and support of the United States and the dilapidated post-war conditions in the south, more peasants flocked to the north for the offer of financial security and the promises of land by Kim Il Sung. Not wanting to repeat Lenin's actions against Soviet peasantry, Kim Il Sung stressed the importance of the peasants and the benefits of joining the communist party of the north. However, most of what Kim Il Sung said during his regime was only spoken and not fulfilled. In actuality, he needed revolutionary fodder in order to create the self-reliant utopia of *juche* he was aiming for.

Moreover, many peasants, wishing to maintain their heritage under *juche*, chose the north over the south; not realizing later that they would not be able to return after the approaching Korean War. Some peasants even separated from their families and chose to support the communist regime due to the promise of a more prosperous life under communism. Kim Il Sung, referring to himself as "we" when talking about the DPRK, said, "We resolved to build the Party, state and armed forces, and also the national economy, education and culture, and develop science and technology by relying on our people's strength."⁶⁷ With the effort to break away from the Soviet Union while keeping their monetary aid intact, Kim Il Sung maintained

⁶⁴ Ibid., 67.

⁶⁵ Kim Il Sung. "My Family," in *With the Century*.

⁶⁶ Paul French. *North Korea: State of Paranoia*. (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2014), 45.

⁶⁷ Kim Il Sung. "The Triumphal Return," in *With the Century*.

necessary but meager communication with the Soviet Union and began mobilizing his peasants with his own efforts using juche-inspired propaganda to build his country. According to Charles Armstrong, author of *North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950*, “The country [the DPRK] was more a product of anticolonial struggle than Soviet manipulation.”⁶⁸

Upon establishing the Korean Worker’s Party (KWP) on June 30th, 1949, which centered on benefiting the peasants with communism and promoting anti-Japanese nationalism, the party acquired an overwhelming amount of members. By July of 1946, more than 105,000 members of “poor peasant” origin were added, and by March of 1948, the numbers increased to more than 700,000 members, of which 374,000 were of poor peasant origin.⁶⁹ The main purpose of the KWP was to solve North Korea’s economic problems and develop an awareness of self-reliance and Korean tradition. Before the northern half of Korea officially became the DPRK, peasants were assisting in irrigation planning and fertilization of farmland in 1947.⁷⁰ However, the peasants’ success under communism did not last long.

In the same year, Kim Il Sung advocated for donations of “patriotic rice” (approximately 1500 tons total) from the peasants, in addition to the 25 percent of the total harvest already given.⁷¹ He believed that it would help industrialize and grow the economy of the DPRK even further. In 1949, the peasants were forced to purchase large quantities of war bonds as the threat of war increased.⁷² Peasants became suspicious of the requests, but they attempted to donate as much as they could in order to fulfil the requirement and show their patriotism to their developing fatherland. The rice was donated along with large sums of money for the upcoming war that would devastate the peninsula after three years.

In the years of the Korean War (1950-1953), many peasants were mobilized and prepared to invade the south to reunite their country once again. On the other side, the United States did not equip the south with U.S. soldiers or weaponry because its supplies were low due to finishing the Second World War five years prior. Additionally, Syngman Rhee, the American-installed president of Korea, often threatened to invade the north. However, the opposite happened when Kim Il Sung, along with 135,000 peasants and communist supporters stormed into south on June 25th, 1950 to reunite the peninsula under communist rule. In order to increase vigor and passion among the peasants, Kim Il Sung addressed his followers on June 26th, one day after his invasion of the south, using politically and emotionally charged words:

On June 25th, the army of the puppet government of the traitor Syngman Rhee launched an all-out offensive along the 38th parallel against the northern half of Korea. The valiant Security Forces of the Republic, fighting fierce battles to

⁶⁸ Charles Armstrong. *North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950*, 33.

⁶⁹ Chong-sik Lee. “Land Reform, Collectivisation and the Peasants in North Korea,” 70.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁷² *Ibid.*

counter the enemy's invasion, have frustrated the advance of the Syngman Rhee army.⁷³

And with regard to the south, he said:

The US imperialists have seized the arteries of the economy in the southern half and completely dislocated the national economy. They are plundering rice, tungsten, graphite and many other natural resources which our country vitally needs...The majority of factories and mills have been closed down, the number of unemployed people has reached several million, peasants have not yet been given land and agriculture is declining year by year. The people in South Korea are in a wretched plight and on the verge of starvation.⁷⁴

And finally, in making a stance toward reunification under his regime:

If they [the South] do not want to become the slaves of foreign imperialists again, the entire Korean people must rise as one in the national-salvation struggle to overthrow and smash the traitorous Syngman Rhee "regime" and its army. We must, at all costs, win ultimate victory.⁷⁵

Using words like "traitor" to refer to those fighting against the DPRK and "valiant" to refer to efforts conducted by the forces in the north helped to establish the support needed to legitimize Kim Il Sung's invasion of the south using peasant forces. Additionally, regarding the south as "in a wretched plight" and "on the verge of starvation" solidifies the notion within the peasantry that being in the north under communism is far better than being in the U.S. imperialist-occupied south. In Kim Il Sung's eyes, the north was enjoying bumper crops, land, and monetary support of the Soviet Union and China, while the south was suffering under capitalism and corruptive western influence under the United States.

Unfortunately, however, it was actually the north that suffered the most after the Korean War. The casualties were disproportionately higher than in the south, and most of the nation's infrastructure was destroyed. Old and young peasants became casualties of war and farmland that was in the path of the war was devastated. However, the DPRK immediately went to work restoring what was destroyed during the war. A Three-Year Plan (1954–1956), focused on what Kim Il Sung's goal was prior to the war, was implemented to develop the economy.⁷⁶ After the success of that plan, the Five-Year Plan (1957–1961) went beyond recovery into exponential growth in industry, agriculture, and infrastructure.⁷⁷ By the late 1950s, all private property was abolished and the government was centrally planned. Kim Il Sung considered this plan to be so successful that he ended it one year early.⁷⁸ Many of the developments were inspired by the Soviet Union; however, with the growing practice of *juche*, Kim Il Sung started to direct the

⁷³ Kim Il Sung, "Go All Out for Victory in the War" (Radio Address to the Entire Korean People, The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, June 26, 1950).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Michael J. Seth. *A Concise History of Modern Korea*, 119.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

DPRK and the peasants down a different path. The relationship between the Soviet Union and Kim Il Sung deteriorated in 1956 as de-Stalinization took place in the country. Kim Il Sung wished to lead his people under his ideology and pursue an independent foreign policy. By slowly pulling away from aid, Kim Il Sung would cause his people, especially the peasants, to suffer the consequences.

With the launch of the Seven-Year Plan in 1961, all the reserves of the poorly-educated peasant labor force used for economic growth were dwindling due to the increase in spending for industrialization and military development.⁷⁹ The concern for the economic development of the DPRK took a back seat to the now growing military power. The militarization of the DPRK in the ideology of *juche* allowed Kim Il Sung to maintain a tight control of the regime.⁸⁰ *Juche* inhibited the educated elites from voicing their opposition to Kim Il Sung, and those who did so were removed.⁸¹ Kim Il Sung was pulling himself away from the ideas of Confucianism and becoming more of a dictator than a Gradually, the DPRK drew further into itself, while remaining economically dependent on only China and the Soviet Union for military funding.⁸² By the 1980s and after several other unsuccessful economic plans, the DPRK's economic growth stagnated. All efforts were placed toward industrialization and military development. Kim Il Sung started a number of "overly ambitious projects," which included freeways, amusement parks, and the construction of the world's tallest hotel, which still remain unfinished today.⁸³ At the same time, the citizens of the DPRK did not consume as they did before due to the declining support of the Soviet Union. As the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and after Kim Il Sung's death in 1994, the DPRK quickly deteriorated, leaving the peasants as bad, if not worse off than those in the former Soviet Union.

The peasants in the rural countryside were the first to feel the negative impacts of the new leader Kim Jong Il's (1994-2011) hasty choices. As the focus on the economy switched to his military-first policy (*songun*) during the mid-1990s, the government could not provide enough resources for its inhabitants. Additionally, flooding and drought ravaged the countryside, destroying what was left of the crops. Soon after, the food supply dissolved and famine settled in. With the meager sources available, it is estimated that 600,000 to 2 million people of the DPRK died due to the famine by 1998.⁸⁴ Most of those casualties are thought to be from the rural countryside. Barbara Demick, author of *Nothing to Envy*, vividly describes the effects the famine in Chongjin, a rural city located in the north Hamgyeong province:

They [North Koreans] stripped the sweet inner bark of pine trees to grind into a fine power that could be used in place of flour... they picked kernels of undigested corn out of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 124.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 131.

⁸¹ Ibid., 124.

⁸² Ibid., 125.

⁸³ Ibid., 214.

⁸⁴ Barbara Demick. *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*. (Spiegel and Grau: 2009), 145.

the excrement of farm animals... people went out to the unguarded cliffs over the sea and with long rakes tied together [and] hoisted up seaweed.⁸⁵

Another testimonial details a woman named Joy who was rescued from the DPRK by the non-profit Liberty in North Korea:

My dad ran a farm, but one day the regime took all of his property. We had to start illegally selling wood to make money. We were always worried that we would get caught. We lived in constant fear and anxiety. I remember not being able to eat for two days. My parents went into the mountains to find grass to boil and eat.⁸⁶

The DPRK government did not want to admit that it was facing this pressing issue because it did not want the foreigners who would come with the aid. Therefore, the DPRK covered up most of the casualties and accepted any foreign food aid (totaling \$2.4 billion and mostly offered by the United States), which ultimately ended up being bartered on the black market.⁸⁷ Between 1996 and 2005, only a few foreign aid agencies were allowed into the DPRK. The aid workers that were allowed into North Korea were restricted to the capital of Pyongyang where only “the best-dressed and best-fed” members of the country were permitted.⁸⁸ Those aid workers could not see the total devastation of the peasantry that the communist government kept well hidden in the mountains and rural villages of the DPRK.

Although the peasants of the DPRK suffered horrid atrocities committed by the regime, they had received more support under Kim Il Sung than had peasants in the Soviet Union under Lenin. Confucian traditions, Korean nationalism, and Kim Il Sung’s support of the peasantry allowed the DPRK to see more success economically, politically, and socially for longer than during the communist revolution of the Soviet Union. However, when the aid disappeared in the DPRK due to economic stagnation, its peasants fared no better than had those in the Soviet Union.

Peasants have never favored well when transitioning into a new economic, political, or social system. They are almost always the last group to know and the first affected. Marxism does not refer to them as a significant group of people for revolution; furthermore, Marx believed they halt the revolutionary process. In the Soviet Union, Lenin’s attitude and policies toward the peasants directly reflected this notion. However, North Korea’s policies toward the peasants were more positive. Although the Soviet Union influenced the development of the DPRK, the country decided to relieve itself of foreign influences and develop *juche*, the ideology of self-reliance. The DPRK learned from the mistakes of the Soviet Union and attempted to create a communist system unique to its country and supported its peasants, but ultimately it too failed because of the inherent problems of communism and its eventual exploitation of the peasant class. In order to create a successful communist revolution, a state must include all members of its society, especially considering the class to which the majority of the population belongs.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 134.

⁸⁶ Liberty in North Korea. “Joy’s Story: Part 1 – Growing up in North Korea,” *Liberty in North Korea* (blog), May 26, 2016. <http://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/joys-story-part-1-growing-north-korea/>

⁸⁷ Barbara Demick. *Nothing to Envy*, 145, 146.

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