

Protracted Purges:  
The Soviet Koreans in North Korea, 1937–1961

**ABSTRACT**

Most studies on Soviet Koreans in North Korea focus on political battles in the highest levels of politics. This paper instead studies the lives of Soviet Koreans on the lower levels of political power. It argues that rather than posing a political threat to the North Korean regime, the Soviet Koreans were purged because they were a separate group with their own history and common experiences, such as the Soviet ethnic deportation in the late 1930s. It also argues that the purge of the Soviet Koreans was more protracted than commonly acknowledged.

In the mid-1950s, mysterious deaths suddenly started to occur in North Korea. People who did not seem suicidal wish took their own lives, and staunchly loyal cadres suddenly confessed that they had spied for foreign countries. One by one, cadres with connections abroad left the country. Political purges descended upon North Korea, and they lasted for almost a decade.

Many of the individuals the state purged were ethnic Koreans from the Soviet Union. Upon occupying the northern half of the peninsula, the Soviet Union sent about 400 Soviet citizens of Korean ethnicity to Korea as interpreters, civil servants and leaders in politics and the military.<sup>1</sup> Most were second- or third-generation immigrants from Korea. They spoke Korean but held Soviet citizenships, and many retained their Soviet passports throughout their time in North Korea. As the political climate turned increasingly tense in the mid-1950s, the space for people with dubious loyalties narrowed. During the purgers, one former political commissar, Hyŏn Hŭi-an (1917–1970), saw “children and wives [of those purged] walking around crying.” According to Hyŏn’s biography, by 1957, “over 90 percent” of the Soviet Korean officials in North Korea had left the country, committed suicide under mysterious circumstances, or been assassinated.<sup>2</sup> In this climate, Hyŏn decided in 1957 to request that the Korean Worker’s Party send him to study in the Soviet Union, and the party granted his request. In 1959 when he was ordered back to North Korea, Hyŏn opted for the cautious route and decided to remain. He resigned his North Korean citizenship, and requested to become a Soviet citizen again.<sup>3</sup> Hyŏn’s story is emblematic of the Soviet Korean experience in North Korea. They arrived as administrators for a foreign occupying force, to a country with which many may have identified culturally, but some had never even visited.

The purges in 1950s North Korea are well covered by existing scholarship, but it rarely focuses on people like Hyŏn. Most research studies the higher pinnacles of political power and competition in the ruling bodies of the Korean Worker’s Party (KWP), and the Soviet Korean group only figures in the narrative as part of a political jigsaw puzzle.

This study is an attempt to give a human face to the Soviet Korean group in North Korea. When one steps above the common periodization of the political battles in 1950s North Korea, a picture soon emerges of a group entangled in the histories of North Korea and the Soviet Union. The purges of the 1950s was not the first time the Soviet Koreans had their fate decided by political turmoil. Suspecting the Koreans of being a Japanese fifth column, a paranoid Soviet security apparatus first deported them from their birthplace in Primorsky krai, the Soviet Far East, to inhospitable environments in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. As of 1935, approximately 200,000 ethnic

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of this group, their role in the Soviet Union occupational administration and the subsequent purges, see Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945–1960* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), especially chapters 1, 3, and 4.

<sup>2</sup> Hyŏn’s biography is part of a collection of biographies of Soviet Koreans whom the Soviet Union sent to North Korea in this way. These biographies form the core of the source base of this paper. “Hyŏn Hŭi-an sŏnsaeng [Mr. Hyŏn Hŭi-an],” in Chang Hak-pong, *P’i wa nunmullossŏ ssiyŏjin uridŭl ūi ryŏksa [Our history written through blood and tears]*. Biographies of Soviet Korean Leaders, published 1995–2001. Rare manuscripts held by Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Accessed 17 March, 2016, [loc.gov/rr/asian/SovietKorean.html](http://loc.gov/rr/asian/SovietKorean.html).

<sup>3</sup> Chang, “Hyŏn Hŭi-an,” 10.

Koreans lived in the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> Soviet security organs deported over 170,000 of them in 1937.<sup>5</sup> Despite their general distrust for Koreans, the Soviet security apparatus later sent 400 of these individuals to North Korea to help construct the new regime under Soviet tutelage. In North Korea, the Soviet Koreans quickly rose to important positions, only to be cast out by regime that they helped construct. Kim Il-sung and his close comrades purged and killed at least 45 of the Soviet Koreans, and hundreds fled back to their native Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> The purge of the Soviet Koreans and other groups swept through North Korea all throughout the 1950s, and continued till the early 1960s. Kim Il-sung and his trusted group of former guerillas took out one potential political opponent after the other. By the late-1960s, their grip on power was virtually unthreatened.<sup>7</sup>

This study focuses on the people caught up in these processes through no involvement of their own. The reality on the ground was very different from that at the top of the state bureaucracy. The Soviet Korean group and their purge can only be fully understood when one steps back and looks at the full narrative, from their forced deportation and lives in the Soviet Union, through the process through which they came to North Korea and the circumstances that forced them out.

This paper argues that rather than being part of a neatly delineated Soviet Korean political faction, the Soviet Koreans were a distinct group with shared experiences – and shared national origins in the Soviet Union – which made them a potential political threat to the North Korean regime. They shared connections both between each other and to the Soviet Union, and spoke Russian, a language alien to most North Koreans. In the age of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union, even mid-level cadres with Soviet ties posed a risk to the North Korean regime. As the political climate grew increasingly narrow, there was no room for individuals with dubious loyalties and ties abroad. These links caused the purge of the Soviet Koreans, but the ties also saved them from imprisonment or death. The narrative of mid-level Soviet Koreans also raises questions about the timeline of the purges. The purges of the top strata can be tied to specific dates and years, such as the Central Committee August Plenum of 1956.<sup>8</sup> From the perspective of people like Hyŏn Hŭi-an, whose story I cite above, the purges did not begin or end on a specific date. Rather, he chose to leave North Korea after a protracted period of increasing surveillance and suspicion. Perspectives like Hyŏn's show that the purges did not follow a clear timeline, and were more protracted than historical accounts usually note.

This paper does not outright challenge the existing historiography on the purges. Rather, it seeks to add depth by using sources that few scholars have studied. Scholarship on the purges in 1950s North Korea is relatively extensive compared to that on many other aspects of the country's history. For example, in their seminal work on the history of Korean communism, Chong-sik Lee and Robert Scalapino use both anonymous witness testimonies and North Korean published materials to survey the purges. They describe the purges largely as a power struggle between the Yan'an faction of Koreans who fought with Mao Tse-tung in the Civil War and came to North Korea in the mid-1940s, the Soviet Koreans, and Kim Il-sung's guerilla faction.<sup>9</sup> Lee and Scalapino argue that Kim Il-sung was close to getting overthrown by his opponents, but managed to retain his position through carefully orchestrated counter-attacks. Dae-sook Suh, too, describes the purges as a political struggle for power between different factions of the Korean Worker's Party.<sup>10</sup> Andrei Lankov's work on the

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<sup>4</sup> By the term "Soviet Koreans," I refer to the group that the Soviet Union eventually sent to North Korea, simply because this is how the literature on their role in North Korea label them. I use phrases such as "ethnic Koreans of Soviet citizenship" or "ethnically Korean Soviets" to denote the larger Korean minority group in the Soviet Union. This phrasing does not represent a stance about their national or ethnic identities, that is, whether they were Soviets, Koreans, or both.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Kim, "On the Preparation and Conduct of the Repression of Koreans in the 1930s Soviet Union," *The Historian* 75, no. 2 (2013): 262–282.

<sup>6</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 103–104.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of these purges, see Dae-sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 141–157.

<sup>8</sup> Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 121–136.

<sup>9</sup> Robert A. Scalapino and Chong-sik Lee, *Communism in Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 510–524.

<sup>10</sup> Suh, *Kim Il Sung*, 141–157.

purges is arguably the most in-depth scholarship to date, and forms the most important secondary-source base for this paper. Using Soviet archival sources as well as interviews, Lankov argues that both personal politics and the winds of de-Stalinization in the 1950s led the Soviet Korean and Yan'an factions to plan a coup against Kim Il-sung, to be executed at the August Plenum of the Korean Worker's Party Central Committee in 1956.<sup>11</sup> He argues that these political dynamics led North Korea to pursue the political line of "national Stalinism" that it arguably holds to this day.<sup>12</sup> James Person reads the Soviet documents differently, and questions whether the opposition to Kim was organized in factions, and argued that it consisted of a number of individuals and personal rivalries.<sup>13</sup> This paper lends some support to Person's argument, for factional divisions do not figure prominently in the Soviet Korean narratives.

These accounts are all valuable treatments of the primary source base they study. The documents they rely on, however, chiefly give insight into the top level of politics. Indeed, Lankov recognizes that his focus is "necessarily and unavoidably on old-fashioned political history," because of the shortage of source material dealing with other spheres.<sup>14</sup> This paper, however, relies on a set of sources held at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., which give insights from a different sphere of the North Korean state apparatus. From the late-1980s till the early 2000s, the Soviet Korean community who left North Korea for Uzbekistan in the late 1950s and early 1960s, collected over 80 handwritten biographies. Chang Hak-pong (1917-?), the former principal of North Korea's Military Academy and one of the Soviet Koreans who ended up returning to the Soviet Union after being purged, collected these biographies to tell their group's version of North Korea's history. Chang himself wrote others, based on information from family, friends and comrades-in-arms of the people in question.<sup>15</sup> In addition to a small number of these biographies, this paper also relies on a series of witness testimonies by Yu Sŏng-ch'ŏl that Sydney Seiler uses to survey the rise of Kim Il-sung. Seiler has translated these witness testimonies and they appear as an appendix in his book.<sup>16</sup>

This paper relies on a careful reading of four out of the 80 handwritten biographies that exist, as well as the translated testimonies by Yu Sŏng-ch'ŏl and Yu's biography from the Library of Congress collection. I chose these biographies based on two main criteria: the richness of their content, and the backgrounds of the people behind them. Only a small number of these biographies are extensive and written in first-person form, and the paper focuses the longest and most substantial ones. Not all or even most of these biographies were written by the people in question, but rather, through fragments and stories that families and comrades of the people in question—Chang Hak-pong in particular—picked up through the years.

This paper focuses primarily on those biographies that are most extensive in length, and on those written in first-person format. Chang Hak-pong's own biography is almost 60 pages long and written in first-person. The same is true for both version of Yu Sŏng-ch'ŏl's testimony. Hyŏn Hŭi-an's biography is written in second-person form, presumably by Chang Hak-pong, and included in this study since it is relatively extensive. Kim Chang-guk's biography is included for the same reasons. Other scholars have already examined Hŏ Ka-i's life story, but I include his biography as well because of his centrality in the Soviet Korean group. Hŏ's daughter wrote most of his biography, and even though it reads as a long defense of his work and life, it contains important details about his trajectory.

This selection of biographies spans over a relatively broad set of backgrounds. I survey one top politician (Hŏ Ka-i), one military commander (Yu Sŏng-ch'ŏl), one educator (Chang Hak-pong)

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<sup>11</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 93–120.

<sup>12</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> James Person, "We Need Help from Outside: The North Korean Opposition Movement of 1956," *Working Paper #52*, Cold War International History Project (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2006), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Chang, "Conclusion," in Chang, *Pihwa nonmul*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Sydney A. Seiler, *Kim Il-sŏng, 1941–1948: The Creation of a Legend, The Building of a Regime* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994).

and one teacher-cum-publisher (Hyŏn Hŭi-an). This *gallery persona* does not represent Soviet Koreans of all walks of life, and the small number of biographies I have surveyed does not suffice to tell their full story. All the same, they give important insights into the lives of a relatively diverse set of people. The biographies span across several historical events: from Stalin's mass deportation of Koreans to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1937, to the dispatch of the Soviet Koreans to North Korea in the mid-1940s, and at last, to their purging and expulsion from North Korea in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

### Between Motherlands: From the Russian Far East to North Korea

The treatment of the Soviet Koreans at the hands of the Soviet state figures prominently in their memoirs, and the Soviet attitude toward national minorities such as the Soviet Koreans had a strong impact on their destiny and trajectory in North Korea. Not least, it must have bonded the Soviet Koreans closer together. The some 400 individuals that the Soviet Union sent to North Korea was an exceptional group, and the Soviet state trusted them with important missions despite its suspicious attitude toward ethnic minorities. Their background in the Soviet Union, moreover, clarifies their identity as "Soviet Koreans": they were Soviet citizens of ethnic Korean background. While the Soviet Union regarded them as Koreans, in North Korea, many instead saw them as foreigners.

The Soviet treatment of Koreans mirrored its overall attitude to national and ethnic minorities. Through the 1920s, the Soviet state strove to uplift, catalogue and rule its minority subjects as distinctive and proud parts of the greater Soviet family.<sup>17</sup> The Soviet state created autonomous regions for ethnic minorities, and supported their cultural distinctiveness through minority schools, publications and cultural organizations, while propagating the ideological messages of socialism. As tensions grew between the Soviet Union and its neighbors in the 1930, however, the state grew increasingly suspicious of minority groups. As strains were mounting between the Soviet Union and Japan, for example, the NKVD decided in 1937 to deport all Koreans in the Far East, ostensibly and ironically because they were Japanese colonial subjects and could pose a security risk. Most were sent to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, at a safe distance from the Far East. The Koreans were not told where they were going, and conditions were dire along the way.<sup>18</sup>

Chang Hak-pong's life and family background is a case-in-point. His account of the deportation decision is more vivid than that of most of the Soviet Koreans. According to his autobiography, his father had worked for the Korean government prior to the Japanese colonial period, and had left for Russia in 1912 after refusing to work for the Japanese administration.<sup>19</sup> Chang himself was born five years later, in 1917, in the far eastern city of Khabarovsk, near the Russian border to both Korea and Manchuria.<sup>20</sup> His family originally hailed from northeastern North Korea, Hamgyŏngbuk-to.<sup>21</sup> On September 21, "I think it was a Monday," Chang recalls, all Korean students above the age of 14 in his school were told to gather in the largest movie theater in Khabarovsk today with their teachers. There, the students found themselves together with many other Korean students, as well as Korean civil servants working in the local administration organs.<sup>22</sup> After an official from the Communist Party had read the deportation order adopted by its Central Committee, the meeting went chaotic, as people began to denounce and protest the orders that all prepare to be sent to Kazakhstan and Central Asia.<sup>23</sup> The following day, Chang and his fellow students were tasked with

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<sup>17</sup> For a seminal overview of Soviet nationality politics, see Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–453.

<sup>18</sup> For an excellent overview of the deportations of the Korean minority, see Gelb, Michael. "An Early Soviet Ethnic Deportation: the Far-Eastern Koreans." *The Russian Review* 54, no. 3 (1995): 389–412.

<sup>19</sup> Chang Hak-pong, "Autobiography," document no. 4 in the collection.

<sup>20</sup> Chang, "Autobiography", 1.

<sup>21</sup> Chang, "Autobiography", 2.

<sup>22</sup> Chang, "Autobiography", 5.

<sup>23</sup> Chang, "Autobiography", 6.

packing up the school for the move across the country. Chang Hak-pong, summarizing his narrative of the time, states that they became “orphans in their own country”.<sup>24</sup>

The biography of Hyŏn Hŭi-an, later an educator and newspaper editor in North Korea, recounts how him and his family were sent to a kolkhoz (collective farm) named Kirov, in a village near the Uzbek capital of Tashkent.<sup>25</sup> When Hyŏn arrived in Uzbekistan, no housing had been arranged for the new inhabitants. The Uzbek locals were forced to make room for the newly arrived Koreans in their already cramped houses, in situations that were surely both awkward and disturbing to both parties. Hyŏn was able to continue his career in teaching, but after the deportations, Korean students were banned from studying in their native language.<sup>26</sup> Hyŏn, however, was relatively well off. In 1942, he joined the Soviet Communist Party, probably based on recommendations due to his teaching work.<sup>27</sup>

Some were better off during the deportations, thanks to their affiliations with the state. Yu Sŏng-ch’ŏl was able to grant his family special treatment and relatively favorable conditions throughout their forcible move from Vladivostok to Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan. He had worked as a typesetter for a Soviet-Korean paper in Vladivostok and was ordered to continue this work in Almaty, granting him certain favors.<sup>28</sup> Hŏ Ka-i, too, who later became the highest ranking of the Soviet Koreans in North Korea, had a sufficiently strong base within the Soviet Communist Party to continue a relatively comfortable life after deportation, and continued to work as a Communist Party functionary at a construction site in Uzbekistan.<sup>29</sup> These cases suggest a pattern among the Soviet Korean group: those that ended up in relatively high positions of power in North Korea had comparatively long-standing relationships with the Soviet authorities.

Many of the Soviet Korean biographies note a shame and pain in being unable to enlist in the Red Army.<sup>30</sup> Some, however, managed to become spies, reconnaissance agents, and special translators early on in the war, either because of special circumstances or luck. Yu Sŏng-ch’ŏl, for example, states that even though he graduated from a Russian language teacher-training program in Tashkent, he did not feel confident enough to teach Russian. Through a friend, he got a teaching job at a middle school – his biography does not specify what he taught. Later, the Soviet army enlisted him for surveillance training.<sup>31</sup> He was not sent to the Western Front like most other new conscripts at the time but instead to a reconnaissance school near Moscow.<sup>32</sup>

Others took a more proactive route. Kim Chang-guk, who later became a senior colonel in the North Korean army and served as the vice-head of its reconnaissance bureau, personally went to the KGB and requested to be recruited for reconnaissance work. This, too, calls Chang’s narrative of victimhood into question. The Soviet Koreans were far from completely powerless at the hands of the Soviet state, and some were proactive in taking destiny in their own hands.

According to Kim’s biography—written in second person, presumably by Chang Hak-pong – Kim had heard rumors about the reconnaissance school in Moscow and saw it as a chance to possibly evade the Soviet restrictions against Koreans serving in the army.<sup>33</sup> The KGB officials told him to

<sup>24</sup> Chang, “Autobiography”, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Chang Hak-pong, “Hyŏn Hŭi-an sŏnsaeng [Mr. Hyŏn Hŭi-an],” in Chang Hak-pong, *Pihwa nunmullusso ssiyojin ryoksa*, biography no. 1 in collection, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Chang Hak-pong, “Hyŏn Hŭi-an sŏnsaeng,” 2.

<sup>27</sup> Chang Hak-pong, “Hyŏn Hŭi-an sŏnsaeng,” 4.

<sup>28</sup> Seiler, *Kim Il-Song*, “Installment 2”, 101–104 in Appendix 5, 103.

<sup>29</sup> Nina Tsoi [?], “Appa nŭn amsal tanghayŏtta [My Father was Assassinated],” in Chang Hak-pong, *Pihwa Nunmullusso Ssiyojin Ryoksa*, biography no. 22, 1.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Chang Hak-pong, “Autobiography,” p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Yu Sŏng-ch’ŏl, “Lieutenant Yu Sŏng-ch’ŏl,” in Chang Hak-pong, *Pihwa nunmullusso ssiyojin ryoksa*, biography no. 78, 3–4.

<sup>32</sup> Seiler, *Kim Il-Song*, “Installment 2,” pp. 103–104.

<sup>33</sup> Chang Hak-pong (?), “Ch’ongchalkuk bukukchang Kim Ch’ang Kuk d’aecho’a [Senior Colonel and head of the reconnaissance bureau, Kim Jang-guk],” in Chang Hak-pong, *Pihwa nunmullusso ssiyojin ryoksa*, biography no. 30, 1.

return in three days, and when he did, he found out that he had been selected. Kim's biography recounts how many other graduates from the reconnaissance school were sent on missions to Korea only to be killed or imprisoned by the Japanese. Some returned to Moscow only to be sent to penal colonies in Siberia, for reasons that Kim's biography does not state—perhaps the Soviet authorities thought they had deserted. Kim, too, was eventually dispatched to Khabarovsk to train with Kim Il-sung's unit and conduct reconnaissance missions across the Amur River, into Korea.<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, Hyŏn Hŭi-an did not come to Korea by way of the reconnaissance school or other military service. Many of the Soviet Korean biographies are adorned with pictures of the people in question in full military garb, with their insignia often at full and obvious display, but Hyŏn's biography is different. Among his photographs, only one of them shows him in military outfit.<sup>35</sup> Unlike many of his comrades, the Soviet army did not recruit Hyŏn until 1945, at the same time as they marched into Korea. Due to his language skills in both Korean and Russian, he was enlisted to serve as an interpreter with the 25th Army of the Soviet Union. He was sent to Korea by way of Hunchun in Manchuria.<sup>36</sup> The Soviets placed Hyŏn in the political headquarters, and began his career as a translator for the political intelligence under the occupation.<sup>37</sup> Through such positions, the influence of the Soviet Koreans grew as the Red Army took control over northern Korea by the end of World War II.

### Coming Home to a New Country?: The Soviet Koreans in North Korea

In 1945, the Soviet authorities informed the Soviet Koreans that they would be sent to Korea. They landed in a hotbed of political turmoil and confusion. Their biographies speak of a return to Korea, but it is unclear in what sense they returned. Some of the individuals surveyed in this paper had never set foot in the peninsula prior to 1945. Indeed, some Soviet Koreans were even third-generation immigrants to the Soviet Union. Moreover, most were sent to work in the military administration in P'yŏngyang, whereas their family roots were in northernmost part of Korea.

It is not difficult to see why the Soviet authorities needed dependable cadres with knowledge of Korean language and culture to run the administration. Knowledge on Korea was scant in the Soviet bureaucracy, and most Korean officials were purged in the 1930s.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the Soviets lacked a natural partner to work with because the indigenous communist party had been virtually crushed by the Japanese colonial government. The party was re-established in August 1945, when the Japanese left and political prisoners were released, but its main organizational base was on the other side of the 38 parallel, in Seoul.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the Soviets did not deem it a worthy partner: one Soviet report from 1945 (presumably in the late fall) states that the communist party lacked a real political platform, and senior cadres were in great shortage.<sup>40</sup> In October 1945, a North Korean branch of the Korean Communist Party was established with Soviet backing, and became the political embryo for the communist party that formed the basis for the North Korean state. The so-called "People's Committees," civilian groups formed by local leaders to prevent anarchy after Japanese rule ceased to function, were already in place on the grassroots level well before the Soviets arrived.<sup>41</sup> But the

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<sup>34</sup> Chang, "Kim Jang-guk," 3.

<sup>35</sup> Chang Hak-pong, "Hyŏn Hŭi-an," 6.

<sup>36</sup> Chang Hak-pong, "Hyŏn Hŭi-an," 5.

<sup>37</sup> Chang Hak-pong, "Autobiography," 14.

<sup>38</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Chong-sik Lee, *The Korean Worker's Party: A Short History* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 74.

<sup>40</sup> Woodrow Wilson Center, "Soviet Report on Communists in Korea, 1945," 1945, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AGShVS RF. F. 172. OP 614631. D. 23 pp. 21-26. Translated by Gary Goldberg. Accessed 2 April, 2016, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114890>.

<sup>41</sup> For more on the People's Committees, see Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution: 1945–1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 44; Erik van Ree, *Socialism in One Zone: Stalin's Policy in Korea, 1945–1947* (Oxford: Berg, 1989), 75.

Soviets did not trust these – one document calls them a “joke,” and claims that bourgeoisie landowners dominated the committees.<sup>42</sup>

In short, the Soviet Koreans were part of the solution to problems of organization and political consciousness. The Soviet regime scavenged its records for trustworthy cadres of Korean ethnicity and turned up a lucky few. Hō Ka-i’s story is illustrative. Hō was the most politically central figure in the Soviet Korean group. At the height of his influence, in 1949, he was the first secretary of the central committee of the then newly established Korean Worker’s Party, essentially the second-highest ranking person in the whole party.<sup>43</sup> Hō was unique even among the Soviet Koreans, because he held a relatively important political post in the Soviet Union before his dispatch to North Korea.<sup>44</sup>

His career began in the *Komsomol*, the communist party youth league, which he joined in 1924, and climbed his way up through the hierarchy. Hō was a top-level *Komsomol* functionary in the Far Eastern regions near Korea at the time of the ethnic purges in 1937, somehow escaped the purges of 1937, probably through a mix of luck of circumstances and fortunate connections high up in the party.<sup>45</sup> Unlike the ethnic Koreans who were deported, Hō moved to Central Asia on his own volition as a cautionary measure during the purges. He was officially rehabilitated by the Communist Party in 1939, and became deputy secretary of the Party committee at a construction site near Tashkent. He worked there till he was drafted by the Soviet military in 1945.<sup>46</sup> He arrived in Pyongyang in 1945, and almost immediately got immersed in the construction of a new communist party organization in Korea. Unlike most other Soviet Koreans who the Soviets dispatched to Korea in 1945, Hō was never expected to serve as an interpreter or translator.<sup>47</sup> One can speculate whether the Soviets saw Hō as more assimilated than other ethnic Koreans. According to Andrei Lankov, Hō did not even have a Korean name at first, unlike most ethnic Koreans in the Soviet Union. He went by Aleksei Ivanovich Hegai until late 1945 or early 1946, when the Korean linguist and communist intellectual Kim Tu-bong suggested he adopt the name Hō Ka-i.<sup>48</sup>

Hō was particularly well versed in communist doctrine, according to both his biography and other scholarship.<sup>49</sup> He was commonly known, according to Andrei Lankov, as a “Professor of Party affairs,”<sup>50</sup> and translated the Soviet communist party’s organizational and political doctrines to Korean.<sup>51</sup> The Soviet sent Hō to North Korea because of his political experience, and essentially tasked him with organizing the North Korean communist party.<sup>52</sup> Thus, within a matter of a few years, Hō went from local party cadre in Tashkent to one of the highest-ranking politicians of the nascent North Korean state. The primary sources do not offer such nuanced insights, but career leaps like Hō’s probably bred resentment among local communists who stayed in Korea and risked their safety while working against the Japanese throughout the colonial period.

Most others who saw a similar pattern of promotion over time began their North Korean careers as translators and interpreters for the army. Translators often punched far over their political

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<sup>42</sup> Woodrow Wilson Center, “Untitled memorandum on the political and morale situation of Soviet troops in North Korea and the economic situation in Korea,” January 11, 1946, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archives of the Russian General Staff, op. 480, 29, st. 5, p. 2, pa. 21, k. 35. Translated by Gary Goldberg. Accessed 2 April, 2016, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114893>.

<sup>43</sup> In 1949, the southern and northern branches of the communist party merged, and the organizational body formerly known as the North Korean Worker’s Party (*Puk Chosŏn rodongdang*) henceforth came to be known simply as the Korean Workers Party (KWP, *Chosŏn rodongdang*). For Hō’s career, see Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 145.

<sup>44</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 137.

<sup>45</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 142–143.

<sup>46</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 142.

<sup>47</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 143.

<sup>48</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 137, 144.

<sup>49</sup> Tsoi [?], “Appa nūn amsal tanghayōtta,” 2; Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 147.

<sup>50</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Tsoi [?], “Appa nūn amsal tanghayōtta,” 2. It is important to note that Hō’s biography may be particularly controversial, given his stature as a symbol for the Soviet Koreans at large. For example, it basically credits him entirely with constructing the North Korean communist party (see page 2).

<sup>52</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 137.

weight. Kim Jang-guk, for example, already worked in northeastern Korea covertly in 1944 and trained with Kim Il-sung and his group of partisans in Khabarovsk, there, he also met Yu Sŏng-chŏl.<sup>53</sup> Kim arrived in Korea on September 19, 1945, on the same Soviet army boat that transported Kim Il-sung over from the Soviet Far East. After he arrived in Korea, Kim continued to work within the Soviet army as an interpreter, “conducting important activities.”<sup>54</sup> After the Soviet army retreated in 1948, Kim was transferred over to the newly established Korean People’s Army, where he became the vice-head of the reconnaissance bureau.<sup>55</sup> During the Korean War (1950–1953), termed the “tragic fratricidal war caused by the North Korean invasion of the South,” in his biography, a land mine injured him badly he went back to the Soviet Union for treatment.<sup>56</sup> Later, he returned to North Korea and became a senior representative in civil aviation. It is unclear precisely what position he held, but his biography states that he often went abroad to countries like the Soviet Union and China for official business.

Hyŏn Hŭi-an was also enlisted as an interpreter in the civilian bureaucracy by the Soviets at first. He later worked in education and publication. His case casts light on the important influence that Soviet Koreans yielded as administrators and publishers. The Soviet army only called in Hyŏn as they were marching into Korea in September 1945. The Soviet army first sent him to Ussirisk, and then on to Hunchun in northeast China. Through a northeastern route, he arrived in P’yŏngyang by way of Chongjin in northern Korea. He only reached P’yŏngyang in October.<sup>57</sup> There, he worked as an interpreter for the Soviet military headquarters. He quickly got involved in some of the most fundamental revolutionary reforms of the nascent government. In 1945 and 1946, North Korea pursued a wide array of socialist reforms such as redistribution of land, nationalization of capital, legislation on gender equality, and other policies for social transformation.<sup>58</sup> Naturally, these were huge undertakings, and the Soviets needed a vast number of interpreters to help.

The Soviets quickly realized they needed to train more interpreters, and part of this task fell on Hyŏn. He became a Russian teacher for Korean civil servants in December 1945, and graduated his first class in June the following year. The graduates of Hyŏn’s class, according to his biography, formed a close bond with their teacher.<sup>59</sup> Hyŏn climbed the career ladder quickly, and at the end of 1946, he was transferred to the Cabinet Senior Leadership Officials School, where he became one of the head instructors.<sup>60</sup> He later became vice-president of the school, and worked there until the end of May 1951. The school was briefly evacuated to Manchuria during the Korean War, but Hyŏn returned to North Korea in 1951 after China intervened in the war and pushed UN forces south.<sup>61</sup>

The bilingual capacity of the Soviet Koreans was crucial for their advancement to power, but their transnational connections also drew suspicion. The ideological climate fluctuated quickly in North Korea in the 1950s. The purges, examined in the next section of this paper, did not reach full swing before 1956. As early as 1955, however, North Korean press launched repeated attacks against Soviet influence in literature and culture.<sup>62</sup> Kim Il-sung later condemned such attacks and they temporarily disappeared, but the brief period of anti-Soviet sentiment was a sign of things to come.

Such trends, however, were not visible in the early 1950s. Foreign press and literature was still widely available in North Korea. After he returned to P’yŏngyang in 1951, Hyŏn Hŭi-an was

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<sup>53</sup> Chang, “Kim Chang-guk,” 9.

<sup>54</sup> Chang, “Kim Chang-guk,” 14.

<sup>55</sup> Chang, “Kim Chang-guk,” 16.

<sup>56</sup> The Korean expression is “*namch’im ŭro inhan Chosŏn tongjok sangjan.*” Chang, “Kim Chang-guk,” 15

<sup>57</sup> Chang, “Hyŏn Hŭi-an sŏnsaeng,” 5.

<sup>58</sup> For more on these policies, see Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution*; Anna Louise Strong, *In North Korea: First Eye-Witness Report* (New York: Soviet Russia Today, 1949), accessed 9 April, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/strong-anna-louise/1949/in-north-korea/#n1>.

<sup>59</sup> Chang, “Hyŏn Hŭi-an sŏnsaeng,” 6.

<sup>60</sup> Chang, “Hyŏn Hŭi-an sŏnsaeng,” 7.

<sup>61</sup> Chang, “Hyŏn Hŭi-an sŏnsaeng,” 8.

<sup>62</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 33.

ordered to set up the magazine of the Soviet Association for Overseas Exchange, *Ssobetu Sinbosa* [Soviet Report]. Hyŏn became the director of the magazine's office.<sup>63</sup> The same year, the magazine published a picture of Hyŏn and a number of Soviet Korean comrades, including Chang Hak-pong. In 1954, he also took on responsibility for the newspaper *Cho-Sso ch'insŏn* (Soviet-Korean Friendship). By this time, Soviet presence in North Korea was drastically reduced compared to what it had been in the mid-1940s. The Soviets withdrew their troops in 1948 and with their departure, the Soviet Korean's avenues for influence and political protection became less certain. As the new North Korean leadership—with Kim Il-sung and his partisan comrades at the forefront—asserted their power and independence, they grew increasingly skeptical of Soviet influences. As the next sections studies in detail, around 1954, many such as Hyŏn, who worked for Soviet organs, were placed under “thought examination” (*ssasang k'omtu*). But according to his biography, Hyŏn continued working as usual.<sup>64</sup> Four more years would pass until he left North Korea, never to return.

The Soviet Koreans were also influential in political education. As in other fields, they climbed rapidly in the ranks. Chang Hak-pong began his career in North Korea as a translator for the political headquarters (*ch'ŏngchibu*) of the Soviet military administration in P'yŏngyang.<sup>65</sup> The Soviets later ordered him to Sinchŏn in Hwanghae-do (present-day Hwanghaenam-do) in southern North Korea, to work as a translator for the Soviet local headquarters. Chang was also involved in implementing the early North Korean socialist reforms. After that, Chang was dispatched to the cadre's training school in P'yŏngyang. At the outbreak of the war in 1950, the school made Chang an advisor within the political department of a brigade within the Korean People's Army, and later in 1950, he was named department head. Chang became head of the political department of a Korean People's Army air force division in 1951.<sup>66</sup> Near the end of the war, in 1953, Chang was named principal of the Kim Ch'aek Political Officers School in 1953.<sup>67</sup> The school taught a wide variety of subjects such as politics, history, military studies and Russian language.<sup>68</sup>

Chang's biography also gives concrete insight into the concrete shape of Soviet influence at the time. Chang also writes that two Soviet advisers were always present at the school, and that they continuously monitored the curriculum content and participated in the school's military exercises.<sup>69</sup> As the political climate in North Korea grew increasingly hostile toward Soviet presence and military personnel were placed under ideological surveillance, in the mid-1950s, the Soviet advisers increasingly began to withdraw. By 1958, all had departed. However, they did not leave only by North Korean government orders. At the face of it, it would seem to fit the North Korean narrative of history that the regime threw out their Soviet minders unilaterally to assert its independence. Already in 1956, however, the Soviet Union promised it would discuss withdrawing its advisors and military personnel from smaller communist countries, which often viewed such personnel as an unwelcome presence.<sup>70</sup>

The Soviet Koreans also wielded considerable influence over political propaganda. None of the biographies surveyed for this paper speak about this at length, but Yu Sŏng-ch'ŏl's autobiographical material offers some insights. Yu was a key person in the foundation of the North Korean army, the Korean People's Army (KPA), and states himself that he “led the founding of the KPA...”<sup>71</sup> He was a Russian language interpreter for Kim Il-sung, and even though he writes that he rarely met him personally.<sup>72</sup> He recounts that his Soviet connections benefitted him a great deal

<sup>63</sup> The magazine was presumably written in the Soviet Union, and printed and translated in North Korea. See Chang, “Hyŏn Hŭi-an sŏnsaeng,” 9.

<sup>64</sup> Chang, “Hyŏn Hŭi-an sŏnsaeng,” 9.

<sup>65</sup> Chang, “Autobiography,” 14.

<sup>66</sup> Chang, “Autobiography,” 19, 29.

<sup>67</sup> Chang, “Autobiography,” 32.

<sup>68</sup> Chang, “Autobiography,” 37.

<sup>69</sup> Chang, “Autobiography,” 38.

<sup>70</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 158.

<sup>71</sup> Seiler, *Kim Il-Song*, “Installment 3”, 109.

<sup>72</sup> Seiler, *Kim Il-Song*, “Installment 3”, 108.

during the occupation, as his Soviet contacts protected him and prevented him from getting transferred to undesirable positions.<sup>73</sup> When recounting the moment when Kim gave his first-ever speech in P'yŏngyang in 1945, Yu writes that Kim's 15-minute speech had been wholly drafted by the Soviet army headquarters and translated by a Soviet Korean. It is difficult to assess the authenticity of an eyewitness account recounted decades after the fact, but according to Yu, local Korean audience members were not impressed with the speech and sneered at Kim for being a "Russkie stooge."<sup>74</sup> Eleven years later, such influences would be purged from the country.

### The Purges

To fully grasp the purge of the Soviet Koreans, the international and domestic contexts need to be studied in parallel. The Soviet Koreans may have been far removed from the top-level of international policy-making, but what happened there greatly impacted their lives. The political atmosphere in North Korea was influenced by the changes that occurred in the communist world in the mid-1950s, particularly through the Yan'an and Soviet Korean groups who held firm contacts abroad. In China, the "Hundred Flowers" campaign unfolded, causing authoritarian leaders such as Kim Il-sung to worry that North Korea's neighbor and ally might implement political liberalization. De-stalinization in the Soviet Union was the bigger threat, however, through the presence of the Soviet Koreans who stayed informed and even spoke talked about the problem of personality cult in North Korea.<sup>75</sup>

The North Korean government and Kim Il-sung responded to these trends through media campaigns and purges against foreign influences. Such developments began only a couple of years after the Korean War ended, but the most severe round of purges began in 1956, after a central committee plenum where several people of Yan'an and Soviet roots openly criticized Kim Il-sung's rule and demanded changes. The event was followed by large-scale purges where those who challenged Kim either fled to the Soviet Union, China or lost their positions of power. One of the critics, Cho'e Chang-ik, was symbolically demoted to the head of a pig farm.<sup>76</sup> Matters calmed down somewhat after a Soviet-Chinese delegation, led by Anastas Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai, visited P'yŏngyang in 1956, to urge Kim to halt the purges.<sup>77</sup> Kim did so, but only temporarily. From early 1957, the regime launched a full-scale purge of the people involved in the August challenge, and within a few years, all were either executed or imprisoned.

These events took place in the highest organs of political power in North Korea. The Soviet Koreans certainly felt their impact, but it is striking how different the timeline looked from lower down the ladder of power. As Andrei Lankov notes, low- and mid-level cadres had nothing to do with the political challenge against Kim.<sup>78</sup> What happened at the top, however, reverberated through all spheres of society as Kim Il-sung and his closest allies shut the door of North Korea to foreign political influences. Even though all details of the purges at the top were not reported broadly, decrees were very likely passed down throughout the ranks and studied at workplaces throughout the country.<sup>79</sup> When speeches and newspaper editorials from the political center spoke out against one group or one type of cadre, people down the line usually understood them as calls to action. Even so, though the purges were launched from the center, they probably found fertile ground throughout the country. The Soviet Koreans were certainly a potential threat to Kim Il-sung's hold on power, but culture, for example, probably mattered too: Soviet Koreans often felt superior to the locals, and their rapid promotions spelled new lifestyles and social positions that probably gave them a sense of entitlement.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Seiler, *Kim Il-Song*, "Installment 7," 128–129.

<sup>74</sup> Seiler, *Kim Il-Song*, "Installment 6," 124.

<sup>75</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 32–33.

<sup>76</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 132.

<sup>77</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 136.

<sup>78</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 132.

<sup>79</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 45.

<sup>80</sup> Andrei Lankov suggests this at Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 130–131.

It is striking how different the timeline of the purge appears in the Soviet Korean biographies. This suggests a level of disconnect between events at the political top and those lower on the political ladder. The biographies rarely mention specific years when the purges intensified, but describe them as a gradual process beginning in the early- or mid-1950s. Chang Hak-pong's narrative of the purges begins in 1953 with the death of Hō Ka-i, the highest ranking of the Soviet Koreans. Hō died under mysterious circumstances shortly after the Korean War ended in the summer of 1953, and both Hō's daughter and Andrei Lankov are convinced that he was murdered on the orders of Kim Il-sung.<sup>81</sup> Chang's first got a clue that something had happened when Pak Chōng-ae, the only Soviet Korean who made it into Kim Il Sung's inner circle of trusted comrades, came by Chang's school for an unannounced visit.<sup>82</sup> Visits by high-ups in the government would always be pre-announced and planned, but this time was different. Pak ordered Chang to gather everyone at the school in the courtyard at 4PM, to listen to an important secret letter from the Central Committee.<sup>83</sup> The letter stated that Hō had committed a number of crimes against the Party and mismanaged his duties. The Party called Hō to a meeting to explain himself, but he never showed up. The letter called him out for betraying his country by committing suicide.<sup>84</sup> After Pak finished reading the letter, people remained silent. Chang did what the Party would have expected him to, and stood up to ask the audience if they had any questions. No one responded.

Hō's own biography – seemingly penned by his daughter, Nina Tsoi – mostly focuses on the circumstances of his death, and seeks to prove that he was murdered rather than committed suicide.<sup>85</sup> Lankov claims that Kim Il-sung purged Hō largely because Hō amassed too much personal power and influence.<sup>86</sup> Soviet diplomatic records from the time give us a glimpse of the political atmosphere at the time. In conversations with the Soviet ambassador Vasily Ivanovich Ivanov in 1955, Kim Il-sung complained that the Party and government institutions were rife with nepotism and inappropriate behavior, and he blamed Hō in particular. Kim singles out Hō Ka-i for recommending dubious friends to high positions, and says that Hō “had gathered some Soviet Koreans around himself and had put them into managerial positions without studying their professional and political qualities [...] He corrupted many officials with his methods and cover-ups. Party and state discipline slackened among some Soviet Koreans.”<sup>87</sup> He also claims that Korean “comrades” from the Soviet Union and China (referring to ethnic Koreans who came to North Korea at liberation in 1945) undermined the Party's work, and engaged in severe corruption. Kim connects Hō Ka-i and other supposedly corrupt cadres and posits them as a network of sorts, that were not only incompetent and wasteful, but outright decadent: “He [Kim Yeol, a Soviet Korean friend of Hō's] himself admitted that he had had cohabitated with 19 women and had spent four million won on parties during the time of work in the province.”<sup>88</sup> Accusations of dubious morals and decadent living were common against purged cadres in communist countries and cannot be taken at face value. They do, however, show how the Party motivated its purges, and that Kim was weary of comrades with long-standing personal ties to each other beyond his control.

<sup>81</sup> Tsoi [?], “Appa nūn amsal tanghayōtta.”; Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 150–153.

<sup>82</sup> Pak Chōng-ae remains one of the few women who ever made it to the top echelons of power in North Korea. Pak founded the Women's League of North Korea, a mass-organization for women in the country. She briefly disappeared from the political stage in 1985 but resurfaced again one year later, albeit in less powerful positions. See Andrei Lankov, “Recalled to life in Pyongyang,” *Asia Times*, 15 April, 2011, accessed 4 April, 2016, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/MD15Dg01.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Chang Hak-pong, “Autobiography,” 38.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>85</sup> Tsoi [?], “Appa nūn amsal tanghayōtta.”

<sup>86</sup> Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 148.

<sup>87</sup> Woodrow Wilson Center, “Journal of Soviet Ambassador to the DPRK V. I. Ivanov for 7 December 1955,” December 07, 1955, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 412. Translated by Gary Goldberg. Accessed 9 April, 2016, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/120764>, 4–5.

<sup>88</sup> Woodrow Wilson Center, “Journal of Soviet Ambassador to the DPRK V. I. Ivanov for 7 December 1955.”

The political climate around the Soviet Koreans grew increasingly harsh after Hō's death, according to Chang. Judging by his testimony, the political climate grew less permissive sooner for those further down on the political than for individuals at the top. Chang was placed under ideological surveillance already in 1954, and around him, people "got liquidated" under strange circumstances. The victims were not just Soviet Koreans: Chang recalls how one comrade from the group of Koreans who came back from exile in China – commonly known as the Yan'an faction – committed suicide by throwing himself in the Taedong river in P'yōngyang.<sup>89</sup> The leadership of Chang's old employer, the air force, was soon replaced after being under ideological scrutiny for some time, on accusations of liberal tendencies and because they were too close to the Soviet Union.<sup>90</sup> The Party demoted Chang shortly after the purges began, and sent to a remote part of the coast of P'yōngyang to a low-level bureaucratic position.<sup>91</sup> For several years, the Party sent him around to various lower-level positions around the country.

His own purge finally came in 1958. In the overall context of purges in communist countries, Chang's purge seems strikingly mild. Lankov writes of public self-criticism sessions, sometimes violent, occurring all across the country in a large-scale "witch hunt."<sup>92</sup> By comparison, Chang's purge seems almost amicable. It is not clear whether he was ordered to leave North Korea, but travelled back to Moscow against his will in 1958. When he arrived, he went to the Soviet Communist Party Central Headquarters, where a letter was waiting for him from the Korean Worker's Party. The letter commended Chang for his brave fight for the country, but said that he had become too influenced by liberalism and the West, and did not obey the Party loyally enough.<sup>93</sup> The letter accused him of "anti-Party [*bandangch'ok*], anti-People [*baninminch'ok*] activities. Therefore, the Party "generously" decided to send him back to the Soviet Union.

Chang's letter highlights a crucial difference between his purge and those of suspected counter-revolutionaries in countries such as the Soviet Union. Lankov claims that a larger proportion of suspected North Korean conspirators were able to flee the country and escape punishment than in perhaps any other purge in the communist world.<sup>94</sup> As the case of the Soviet Koreans shows, this may hold true at the lower levels of the hierarchy as well. The language and stated causes for the purge too, however, points to an important difference between the North Korean case and others. Chang's purge and its stated causes contained none of the never-ending interrogation of the Self that was so prominent in Stalin's purges in the 1930s.<sup>95</sup> Soviet interrogators would routinely dig up past errors revealing the evil intentions of the purge victim.<sup>96</sup> The very opposite happened in Chang's case: the Party thanked him for his services, but decided it was time for them to part ways.

Given the regime's campaign against Soviet influences, Hyōn Hūi-an's purge is not surprising. He worked at the newspaper of the international Soviet friendship association in the mid-1950s and was placed under ideological surveillance, like many others in similar positions. His biography claims that Hyōn kept working as usual, while others got more cautious and "grew silent" as the political climate narrowed.<sup>97</sup> Hyōn saw friends and colleagues getting arrested all around him, and "when he saw the children and wives of cadres walking around crying, he had a foreboding of the way that laid in front of him as well."<sup>98</sup> He had to act, and asked to he sent to the Soviet Union for exchange studies. The Party granted his request and sent him to study at the magazine publishing

<sup>89</sup> Chang Hak-pong, "Autobiography," 44.

<sup>90</sup> Chang Hak-pong, "Autobiography," 45.

<sup>91</sup> Chang Hak-pong, "Autobiography," 50.

<sup>92</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 151.

<sup>93</sup> Chang Hak-pong, "Autobiography," 52.

<sup>94</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 132.

<sup>95</sup> Igal Halfin, *Stalinist Confessions: Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>96</sup> Halfin, *Stalinist Confessions*, 4.

<sup>97</sup> Chang, "Hyōn Hūi-an sōnsaeng," 9.

<sup>98</sup> The original quote reads: "... Aidül kwa puindül i ulgo tanninün köt ül pul ttae e chagi ap kil to mölji ant'anün köt ül yegam hage toeötta." See Chang, "Hyōn Hūi-an sōnsaeng," 9.

department (*ch'abch'i hakbu*) of the Moscow Party School. Hyön spent two years at the school and was called back to P'yöngyang in 1959. Well aware of what had happened to people such as himself during the purges, he requested that his Soviet citizenship be reinstated. He resigned his North Korean passport and requested that his membership in the Korean Worker's Party be revoked as well.<sup>99</sup>

Yu Söng-chöl's account of his purge is more extensive than the preceding ones. His purge also took on a more damning nature than Chang's, probably because he was higher up in the hierarchy. The contrast between these two purges shows the complexity of the process: the Party condemned some with damning political accusations, while it parted ways in a pragmatic, matter-of-fact-like-tone, with others. Yu was in the Soviet Union on an exchange program in the Soviet Union between 1956 and 1958, and escaped the most intensive political turmoil in P'yöngyang. He did not seem to realize that the process was still unfolding in 1958, or he just ignored the risks and went back anyway. When he came back, he was surprised that no one greeted him at the airport. Drivers and colleagues were at the airport to meet all other officials who returned, but no one came for Yu. During his sojourn in the Soviet Union, Yu heard rumors about the purges in North Korea, but did not realize he might be implicated.

On the third day back at his job at the Operations Bureau of the Ministry of National Defense, he received a note ordering him to attend a meeting with a "Thought Examination Committee." There, the chairman of the meeting read his crimes to him: (1) denouncing the people's loyalty to Kim Il-sung, (2) claiming that Kim had started the Korean War, (3) individualist tendencies, and (4) spying for the Soviet Union.<sup>100</sup> These charges are much closer than Chang's to the Stalinist purge ideal. They touch upon crimes of the past, proving that Yu had been a bad element for many years. Interrogators in the Soviet Union used the histories of purge victims to show that their transgressions were not just temporary flukes, but parts of a pattern revealing their true and innate character, making their crimes irredeemable no matter how small.<sup>101</sup> The difference between Chang and Yu's purges suggests that the regime was more careful to prove an innate, bad character for those at the relatively high levels, such as Yu, while paying less attention to these patterns for individuals such as Chang.

Yu refuted the accusations but that did not matter. He was stripped of his position as commander of the Operations Bureau of the military, and was forced to attend "thought examination" meetings every night between 7pm and 1am for two months. During the day, he was placed in an empty room with a desk, a pen and a piece of paper, and forced to write "letters of reflection" supervised by a guard.<sup>102</sup> Yu describes a particular form of psychological torture common in communist countries at the time, though interestingly, it seems that North Korea employed public "self-criticism" rituals on a large scale before China did.<sup>103</sup> By January of the following year, he and his family were kicked out of their house. Thanks to his connections, Yu found work as a local cadre in present-day Hamgyöngnam-do, in northeastern North Korea.<sup>104</sup> When he got there, however, the party seemed to have changed its orders: he was met with a hostile attitude by the local officers, and started to suspect that he was going to get executed in this far-off end of the country where no one knew him.<sup>105</sup> After speaking with friends and close confidants, Yu realized that the government probably suspected him of being part of a plot by military officers to overthrow Kim Il-sung. Through the rumor mill, Yu heard that people such as him might be allowed to leave for the Soviet Union if they requested permission. The Party granted his request almost immediately after he wrote them a letter asking that they allow him to leave for the Soviet Union.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Chang, "Hyön Hüi-an sönsaeng," 9–10.

<sup>100</sup> Seiler, *Kim Il-Song*, "Installment 15,"

<sup>101</sup> Half, *Stalinist Confessions*, 7.

<sup>102</sup> Seiler, *Kim Il-Song*, "Installment 15," 175.

<sup>103</sup> For a classical study of brainwashing and thought reform in China, see Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'Brainwashing' in China* (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1967). For North Korea's earlier introduction of self-criticism rituals, see Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 151.

<sup>104</sup> Seiler, *Kim Il-Song*, "Installment 15," 177.

<sup>105</sup> Seiler, *Kim Il-Song*, "Installment 16," 180.

<sup>106</sup> Seiler, *Kim Il-Song*, "Installment 16," 181–182.

By the early 1960s, most of the Soviet Koreans had fled North Korea. Some had been killed or imprisoned, but most survived by leaving the country. These purges were certainly tumultuous and severe for the people involved, but compared to other purges, they were not that dramatic. A comparative light helps us understand why. As Igal Halfin writes, the Soviet communists "...killed the similar, not the different."<sup>107</sup> The Soviet Koreans, however, were in fact different. Treason is often greater when it comes from the inside, committed by people thought to be trustworthy members of the core political group. Among the Soviet Koreans, by contrast, many were not even North Korean citizens, or only became citizens out of convenience. They all spoke a language alien to most North Koreans. Many travelled abroad regularly, and had a wholly different training in communist doctrine than the likes of Kim Il-sung, who did not even graduate high school.<sup>108</sup> Unlike the Soviet Communist Party, its North Korean equivalent did not have to work hard to seek out the potential traitors, for their Soviet connections were a well-established fact in plain sight. Halfin's claim also holds factually true for the Soviet Koreans, for most were not killed. Lankov estimates that out of the some 400 Soviet Koreans, only around 45 disappeared as a result of the purges.<sup>109</sup> The rest left the country. As the North Korean regime asserted its political and cultural independence from the Soviet Union, there was simply no place for people with dubious political loyalties and international connections.

### Conclusion

This study argues that the Soviet Koreans were a distinct group with transnational ties to both the Soviet Union and North Korea. Their careers in North Korea were built on positions largely granted to them by the Soviet Union. They were a not formally organized group, but they shared connections both amongst each other and to institutions in the Soviet Union. These ties ultimately led the core power group around Kim Il-sung to purge the Soviet Koreans and pressure them to return to the Soviet Union. Ultimately, their ties were the root of their misfortune, but also saved their lives.

The Soviet Korean narrative of the purges probes us to ask questions both about purges in North Korean history, but also about the general nature of purges. First, much scholarship paints North Korean history as heavily steeped in ideological fervor and extremism.<sup>110</sup> This may well be a correct depiction of contemporary North Korea, but the purge of the Soviet Koreans suggests far more complexity. While the purge of people like Yu Sŏng-chŏl contained some ideological motivation, other purges occurred in a remarkably non-dramatic fashion. The state did not purge the Soviet Koreans with the same political passion as, for example, the Chinese communists did with potential political deviants during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>111</sup> This urges us to reconsider the role of ideology in North Korean history. Perhaps scholars overestimate because it is so prominent in North Korean propaganda, often the sole available resource for certain topics and time periods. B. R. Myers argues that some scholars may overstate the role of *Juche* as an ideological guideline.<sup>112</sup> The case of the Soviet Koreans probes us to reconsider the role of ideology in general, not only for the purges, but for other policies as well.

Second, the Soviet Korean narrative makes important points about purges in general. They need not always be large-scale witch-hunts involving physical violence. They can take on a relatively benign and pragmatic character, particularly when those being purged are regarded as different from the rest of society. The purge of the Soviet Koreans probes us to ask questions about the fringe of the purges – how differently do they impact those in the more marginal spheres of politics, compared to those at the highest pinnacles of power?

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<sup>107</sup> Halfin, *Stalinist Confessions*, 3.

<sup>108</sup> Suh, *Kim Il Sung*, 3.

<sup>109</sup> Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 190.

<sup>110</sup> One such account is Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

<sup>111</sup> For an account of some of these purges, see Anne F. Thurston, *Enemies of the People: The Ordeal of the Intellectuals in China's Great Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>112</sup> B. R. Myers, *North Korea's Juche Myth* (Busan: Sthele Press, 2015).

Finally, this paper leaves a number of crucial questions unanswered. The source documents suggest that cultural friction played a role in the run-up to the purges. The question of how cultural differences between people of various national origins impacted the political climate in early North Korea needs to be further examined by scholars. Moreover, by studying a greater number of biographies, scholars could better discern patterns in the purges. These documents, with their faults and flaws, provide a remarkable window into the memory of North Korea's arguably most politically volatile period, and more remains to be uncovered.

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