

The Personal File of Jin Richeng (Kim Il-sung): New Information on the Early Years of the First Ruler of North Korea

KONSTANTIN TERTITSKI and FYODOR TERTITSKIY

This article studies an important period 1929–1931 in the life of Kim Il-sung (C. Jin Richeng), the first leader of North Korea, through an analysis of his previously unknown personal file written by officials of the Communist International in the Soviet Union in 1941 after Kim had escaped to the USSR from Manchukuo. It is possibly the first biography of Kim Il-sung ever written. The document sheds new light on some aspects of Kim's early life, including his arrest in 1929, his service in the Chinese People's National Salvation Army, and the events surrounding his admission into the Chinese Communist Party. On the basis of this file and other documents of the era, such as diaries of Kim's superior Zhou Baozhong and Comintern chief Dimitrov, this paper presents an account of Kim Il-sung's life and career in the late 1920s – early 1930s and reveals the distortions of the official North Korean biography of Kim Il-sung in service to the ideological goals of the state.

Keywords: Chinese People's National Salvation Army, Comintern, Jin Richeng, Kim Il-sung, Korean Youth Communist Society

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The rise of Kim Il-sung (Kim Il-sŏng) the first ruler of North Korea, is one of the most unusual events in the history of communist countries. He ascended to power as a relatively unknown figure, unlike the pioneer leaders of the Soviet Union's satellite nations. In Eastern Europe, the first leaders of the countries of the Soviet bloc were politicians who had usually been well-known figures before taking power. Some of these, like Georgi Dimitrov or Klement Gottwald, were men who had gained fame before World War II. Others, like Walter Ulbricht, Boleslaw Bierut, Rákosi Mátyás, were people who had occupied leading positions in the political leadership of their parties. Still others were established leaders of the partisan movements of their countries, like Josip Broz Tito and Enver Hoxha. Even in Romania, where the situation was more complicated and there was a struggle for power within the party, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, who secured leadership despite having been imprisoned from 1933 to 1944, had been an influential figure in the Romanian communist underground as the leader of his "prison faction" of party activists (Tismaneanu 2003, 99). Mao Zedong in China and HỒ Chí Minh in North Vietnam were also leaders who had gained prominence in the pre-war period.

By comparison, Kim Il-sung was an obscure figure: a former field commander of a partisan unit in Manchukuo and, from 1942, a captain of the Red Army (*Voyennyj Sovet Vtorogo Dal'nevostochnogo fronta* 1945). Little was known about him until the Soviet authorities chose him in 1945 to be the future leader of North Korea. Because of his lack of prominence, documents relating to the early life of Kim are scarce and the earlier the period, the scarcer the documents become. The post-1945 activities of Kim are naturally well-documented, and there are some testimonies regarding his service in the Red Army but only general information regarding his partisan activities is available. Information regarding the years immediately preceding him joining the guerrilla movement is even more limited. Dae-Sook Suh, the author of the classic biography of Kim Il-sung, speaks of a "gap from the end of Kim's education in 1929 to his active participation in guerrilla activities in 1932" (Suh 1998, 6). The purpose of this article is to start filling this gap and covering this crucial period of Kim Il-sung's life.

Kim's previously unknown personal file compiled by the Soviets following his escape to the USSR, as well as the diaries of Comintern chief Georgi Dimitrov who personally managed the affairs of the communist guerrilla movement in Manchukuo, and diaries of one of the movement's most prominent commanders, Zhou Baozhong, enable us to present new information on the early life of Kim Il-sung and compare it with the established scholarly narrative as well as with the DPRK's official biography, one of the central pillars of the North Korean state ideology.

Early Biographical Research

Compared to other leaders of the Communist countries, Kim's pre-1945 activities have not been well researched. As a guerrilla underground fighter, Kim lived in the shadows and

because he was not prominent before his rise to power, only a small number of documents describe his life in detail. Few of these documents survived the collapse of Manchukuo in 1945, the Soviet occupation of Manchuria, and the subsequent incorporation of the territory by the People's Republic of China. Finally, most of the surviving documents about the early period of Kim's life remained in Soviet or Chinese archives which for decades were closed to researchers.

An additional problem was that after Kim Il-sung came to power, his biography was heavily distorted by North Korean authorities for the purpose of aggrandizing his personage. The process started soon after the Soviets chose Kim to lead the DPRK and as time went by, the narrative evolved to become less and less reflective of the actual history. Initially, Soviet authorities merely presented Kim Il-sung's partisan unit as a major resistance force called the Korean People's Revolutionary Army (*Chosŏn inmin hyŏngmyŏnggun*, KPRA) but from the early 1950s the DPRK publications started to claim that his unit had assisted the Red Army in the Soviet-Japanese War (*Kim Il-sŏng changgun ūi ryakchŏn* 1952, 32). After the proclamation of the "only thought system" (*yuil sasang ch'egyŏ*) in 1967, however, North Korea began to teach that it was Kim and the KPRA who had defeated the Japanese Empire. The North Korean state further reinforced this official narrative with the publication of the first volume of the *Complete Works of Kim Il-sung*, published in 1995, consisting mostly, if not exclusively, of fabricated material (Sŏ 2006; Tertitskiy 2018, 219–238).¹ This ever increasing amount of propaganda materials has only made the task of uncovering Kim Il-sung's early career more difficult.

This hagiographic discourse was reflected to a certain extent in Cold War-era Soviet and Chinese publications. In the Soviet Union, there was no publication dedicated exclusively to Kim Il-sung's biography; rather this topic was covered in the entries of various encyclopaedias. The earliest were in the second edition of *Bol'shaya sovetskaya entsiklopediya* [The Great Soviet encyclopaedia] (625–626) of 1953 and in the second volume of the *Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar'* [Encyclopaedic dictionary] (72) of 1954. Both versions drew directly on the 1952 version of Kim's biography published in North Korea. As in the DPRK, the Soviet encyclopaedias asserted that Kim Il-sung had graduated from middle school, was arrested in 1927–28, and was a member of "a Komsomol organisation" and of the "Communist Party," without specifying that these organisations were Chinese.

Under Nikita Khrushchev, a new version of Kim's biography appeared in the fourth volume of the *Malaya sovetskaya entsiklopediya* [Concise Soviet encyclopaedia] (1959, 732–733) and later published the seventh volume of the *Sovetskaya istoricheskaya entsiklopediya* [Soviet historical encyclopaedia] (1965, 40). This narrative was closer to the truth; it stated Kim Il-sung had been a member of the Communist Union of Chinese Youth (*Kommunisticheskiy soyuz molodyozhi Kitaya*),² and the date of his arrest was given as 1929. There was no reference to the

¹ For the basic information about the most important North Korean hagiographic texts, describing Kim Il-sung's biography see Suh (1988, 339) notes 1–2, 4.

² The standard translation of the name of this organization – *Zhongguo gongchanzhui qingniantuan* – is "The Communist Youth League of China."

fact that he had graduated from middle school in the entry. In the age of Brezhnev, Kim's biography was published in the third edition of *The Great Soviet encyclopaedia*, which came out in 1973 (112). The dates for the early period of Kim's life were the same as in the encyclopaedia published under Khrushchev, while membership in "a Komsomol organisation" and the "Communist Party" were once again, as in 1954, referenced without mentioning that these were Chinese organizations. Finally, under Gorbachev, the USSR published "The Selected works of Kim Il-sung" (*Kim Ir Sen. Izbrannye proizvedeniya* 1987). The biographical appendix merely mentioned that Kim had been a member of a "revolutionary movement," with no mention of either the youth organisation or the Communist Party (*Kim Ir Sen. Izbrannye proizvedeniya* 1987, 181–182).

In general, the content of these texts was influenced by the political atmosphere of subsequent periods of Soviet history. During the liberal era of Khrushchev, the biographical narrative became closer to reality; during the Sino-Soviet split, references to the "Chinese" elements of Kim's biography were removed from the text, and later under Gorbachev, the wording became neutral, evidently in order not to create problems in dealing with the DPRK – an uneasy partner with which the Soviet Union was striving to create a better relationship at the time. The common feature of these works was the fact that at the time, Soviet archival materials were classified and therefore not used for Kim's biographies in these publications.

Compared with the Soviet writers who did not foreground the events related to Kim Il-sung's activities, Chinese authors were in a more difficult situation. The activity of partisans during the war with Japan was an important topic, since it occupied a significant place in the historical narrative prescribed by the Communist Party. In this view, it was the communist guerrilla movement, not the Kuomintang Army, that was the main force of anti-Japanese resistance. In addition to sealed archives, Chinese researchers before the 1990s faced a censorship problem. In the interest of maintaining friendly relations with North Korea Chinese censors blocked attempts to truthfully narrate Kim Il-sung's early life because to do so would directly contradict the myth of the "great leader of the Korean People's Revolutionary Army" that the DPRK had started to promote. As a result, one of the first biographies of Kim Il-sung in Chinese, if not the first one, published in June 1952, was a translation of a special issue of *Rodong sinmun*, which had been published about two months earlier on April 10, 1952 (*Jin Ribeng jiangjun chuanlie* 1952).

When Chinese authors wrote about the partisan movement in Manchuria, they were forced to harmonize any information they had with the North Korean state myth of Kim Il-sung and his "KPRA". A possible compromise was to omit his name from the event in which he had participated. A vivid example of such a policy is the book "A Brief History of the First Field Army of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army," published in the 21st volume of *Jilin wen shi ziliao xuanji* [Selected works of Jilin literature and history series] in 1987. In this publication, editors either replaced Kim Il-sung's name with three exes (XXX) or with the position without including his name.³ This was a general practice as Chinese historians

³ For example, when talking about commanders of the anti-Japanese movement, the book may have mentioned commanders of the First and Second Division by name, while the commander of the Third Division, Kim Il-

expounded upon Kim's biographical details in those years, mostly without mentioning his name.⁴

As for South Korea, more-or-less objective research on Kim Il-sung was possible even during the era of state anti-communism but scholars could not access Soviet or Chinese documents. The South Korean academic community was aware of the general narrative of Kim's biography but many details of his pre-1945 life remained unknown. During the Cold War, South Korean scholars had to reconstruct Kim's biography from anecdotal evidence and post-1945 documents. This situation gave birth to a rather bold supposition called "the fake Kim Il-sung hypothesis" (*Kim Il-sŏng katcha sŏl*) which suggested that the Kim Il-sung who ruled North Korea and the Kim Il-sung who had been the famous guerrilla fighter were two different men. This hypothesis existed in various versions from the more radical ones that claimed Kim the ruler used to be a Soviet Korean, to more moderate ones claiming that while he did fight the Japanese in Manchuria, the most famous attack attributed to him – the raid on the guard post at the Japanese-Manchurian border in 1937 – was directed by a different person (Pak 1970; I 1974). The fake Kim Il-sung hypothesis likely originated from the fact that "Kim Il-sung" was not the original name of the man appointed to rule the future DPRK; born Kim Sŏng-ju, he later changed his name to Kim Il-sung, reportedly in honour of another partisan commander. The work of Dae-Sook Suh, based on primary Japanese sources, largely disproved this hypothesis (Suh 1967, 256–293). The opening of archives in China and the Soviet Union in the 1980s has enabled the academic community to completely reject it.⁵ Currently, it receives support only from a fraction of South Korean conservatives.

sung, was referred to as the "former political commissar of the Third Regiment" (*Dongbei kang ri lian jun di yi lu jun jian shi* 1987, 86).

⁴ It was said, that in 1935 "XXX" was the political commissar of the Third Regiment of the Independent Division of the Second Army of the Northeast People's Revolutionary Army (*Dongbei kang ri lian jun di yi lu jun jian shi* 1987, 69, 71); earlier, when this Division had been created in 1934, the political commissar of the Third Regiment was Nan Changyi (61–62). In 1936 the Second Army of the Northeast People's Revolutionary Army (*Dongbei renmin geming jun di er jun*) was transformed into the Second Army of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army (*Dongbei kang ri lian jun di er jun*) and the "former political commissar of the third regiment" was appointed the commander of the Third Division (*Dongbei kang ri lian jun di yi lu jun jian shi* 1987, 86). In 1936 "XXX" became the commander of the Sixth Division of the First Field Army of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army (*Dongbei kang ri lian jun di yi lu jun jian shi* 1987, 93). In 1938, the Sixth Division was transformed into the Second Area Army of the First Field Army of the North East Anti-Japanese United Army, and the command of the Army was taken by the former "commander of the Sixth Division" (*Dongbei kang ri lian jun di yi lu jun jian shi* 1987, 126–127). The actions, taken by the "commander of the Sixth Division," were also mentioned in the book several times (*Dongbei kang ri lian jun di yi lu jun jian shi* 1987, 108, 113, 119). For most readers, it was not easy to understand whose biography was described on these pages. The situation was even more complicated because Kim Il-sung was also mentioned in the book several times (*Dongbei kang ri lian jun di yi lu jun jian shi* 1987, 85, 108, 109, 143), where it was possible to do so without touching on the sensitive problem of his administrative affiliation.

⁵ Apart from testimonies of people who knew Kim Il-sung, perhaps, the most definite disproof of the "fake Kim Il-sung hypothesis" is the 1937 report of the colonial Korean newspaper *Tong-a Ilbo*. The report mentions Ch'oe Hyŏn as one of the people who conducted the raid with Kim (*Kim Il-sŏng Ch'oe Hyŏn ilp'a kangsan chaeŏp ūl hoŏn*, 1937, 2). Ch'oe was one of Kim Il-sung's closest comrades, serving as the Minister of the People's Armed Forces in the DPRK before his death in 1982. This would have never happened had the Kim Il-sung who ruled North Korea been a different person from the Kim Il-sung who attacked Poch'ŏnbo.

Later Biographical Research

Beginning in the late 1980s liberalization in both the USSR and the PRC allowed for greater access to Soviet and Chinese archives. This development caused a significant rise in the quality of English, Chinese, Russian, and Japanese research. In a way, even North Korea reacted to this by changing its state historical narrative in an attempt to incorporate some of the newly discovered facts. The DPRK's reaction was the publication of the memoirs of Kim Il-sung entitled "With the Century" (Kim 1992–1998), which, although still presenting a very heavily distorted biography, did admit, for example, that he was at least occasionally in the USSR in the early 1940s.

The first true research on Kim's early years became possible only in the late 1980s with the new, liberal political environment of the USSR and of the PRC. At this time two classic works on the subject were written: Dae-Sook Suh's (1988) "Kim Il Sung: The North Korean leader" in English and Wada Haruki's (1992) "Kim Il-sung and the Anti-Japanese War in Manchuria" in Japanese. Since then, little has been published to enhance Suh and Wada's research which has now become the standard English-language references for the early years of Kim Il-sung.

The most important Chinese publication on Kim Il-sung in this new period was "The History of the Struggle of the Northeast United Anti-Japanese Army" (*Dongbei kang ri lian jun douzheng shi* 1991). It was authorised by a joint decision of the PRC Chairman Yang Shangkun and former Chinese Politburo members Hu Qiaomu and Bo Yibo and was possibly the first Chinese publication to discuss Kim's early biography accurately and in detail. Indeed, so remarkable was this book that the very process of its publication became a topic for another research paper (Shi 2012, 26–27). Several more publications on Kim appeared afterward, such as Li Hongwen's book on Korean participation in the communist movement of the Northeast China (Li 1996) and a collection of materials on the revolutionary movement in that region, but no radically new information appeared in these texts.⁶

New Russian biographies of Kim Il-sung started to appear from the 1990s. The most prominent of these was Andrei Lankov's "Kim Il-sung: an attempt at a biographical sketch", which was first published in his book "North Korea: Yesterday and Today" (Lankov 1995, 10–49). As the book was based not only on previous research from the early 1990s, but also on Lankov's own interviews with people who had known Kim Il-sung in the 1940s, this

⁶ A good example of the new information which can be found in this collection are two brief reference letters on Kim Il-sung, which were prepared in March and December 1935 and published in this collection: "Kim XX (Korean), Political Commissar of the Third Regiment, joined the party in 1933, loyal, active, brave, has much experience in guerrilla warfare, in the past was a political instructor of a partisan company, worked in the National Salvation Army, was the [Party organization] secretary of a large partisan detachment, and [then] the chief of staff [of the detachment], enjoys considerable confidence of the National Salvation Army" (*Dongbei diqu geming lishi wenjian huiji* 30 1989, 247). "Kim XX" mentioned in the quote is Kim Il-sung (Yang and He 2001, 858). "Kim Il-sung, Korean, joined the Party in 1932, a student, brave and active, can speak Chinese, promoted by the partisan squad fighters, many times orally confessed in Minshengtuan membership, likes talking with the squad fighters, enjoy the squad fighters' confidence and also enjoys the confidence of the National Salvation Army, knows not much on the political issues" (*Dongbei diqu geming lishi wenjian huiji* 67 1989, 180).

turned out to be one of the best Kim biographies the time, especially when it came to period of his life in the late 1940s. However, Lankov used no archival sources and thus left Kim's early years in the Soviet Union largely uncovered.⁷

Despite this dramatic improvement in the quality of research during the last 30 years, information on Kim Il-sung's early years remains scarce. It is this continued scarcity that highlights the importance the document in question in this article: "Lichnoye delo Tszin Zhi-chena" [The personal file of Jin Richeng]. Held in the State Archive of Social and Political History and hitherto unknown by historians of Kim Il-sung and North Korea, this file allows scholars to further establish which parts of the received early Kim biography are more likely to be accurate while suggesting material in need of revision. Moreover, the combination of the new information contained within the file with existing research suggests new findings and directions for future work.

Structure and Content of "The Personal File of Jin Richeng"

The file contains only twelve pages, all of which are linked to one event: an interrogation of Kim Il-sung after his escape to the Soviet Union in early 1941. Kim Il-sung was a middle-level commander of a guerrilla unit operating under the Chinese Communist Party, which was part of the resistance to the Imperial Army of Japan in Manchukuo. In the late 1930s, Kim's unit was almost completely destroyed by a Japanese counterattack, forcing him and a few of his comrades to flee to the USSR (Suh 1988, 15–47; Ryō 1991, 113–116). After his arrival, the Soviets detained Kim and subjected him to interrogation (Ryō 1991, 114). Eventually, after establishing his identity, the Soviets put him through a training course in a local Soviet military academy and, upon graduation, assigned him the rank of captain in the Red Army and appointed him as a battalion commander in the 88th Infantry Brigade. The Soviets prepared the file in the period between Kim's defection and his commission in the Red Army. It was at the request of the Comintern and, possibly Soviet military intelligence,⁸ that he filled out a questionnaire in Chinese, which was later translated into Russian. Based on this questionnaire, four Comintern cadres, Konstantin Vilkov,⁹ Aleksey Zyuzin,¹⁰ Ivan

⁷ The only archival documents related to this period of Kim Il-sung's life and published in the 2000s were apparently two texts included in the collection of documents on the history of the communist movement in Korea. The first one can be found in [VKP(b), *Komintern i Koreya. 1918-1941* 2007, 739-743]. Signed by Kim Il-sung, An Kil and Sō Ch'ōl, it was presented on January 1, 1941. This document is the contemporary translation of the Chinese original and the original text could be found in [*Dongbei diqu geming lisbi wenjian huji* 60 1990, 95-105]. The second one is a report of K. F. Vilkov, I. P. Plyshevsky, A. G. Zyuzin, and A. I. Kogan [VKP(b), *Komintern i Koreya. 1918-1941*, 2007, 744–762].

⁸ The source for this supposition is the diary of Georgi Dimitrov, who at the time was the General Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Comintern. According to the diary, in January 1941 the Comintern was dealing with Manchurian partisans in cooperation with the Soviet military intelligence (Dimitrov 1997, 207).

⁹ Konstantin Fyodorovich Vilkov (1905–1947). In January 1941 Vilkov was Deputy Head of the Cadres Department of the Executive Committee of Comintern.

¹⁰ Aleksey Grigoryevich Zyuzin (b. 1903). In 1941–1943 Zyuzin was an analyst ("referent", later "senior referent") on China in the Secretariat and the Cadre Department of the Executive Committee of Comintern.

Plyshevskiy¹¹ and Aleksandr Kogan,¹² compiled a reference letter to their superiors, making their assessment of Kim Il-sung—one of many reference letters on Manchurian partisans this team produced.

The file is organized in reverse chronological order it makes sense to follow that order here: from the last page to the first. Pages eleven and twelve contain a questionnaire in hand-written Chinese. Judging from a difference in handwriting, it was filled out by two people. One wrote down the questions with a blue pencil and the other one provided the answers, writing them with a black pencil. Judging by the other material in the document, the questions were possibly written by a Soviet interrogator, one of the four above-mentioned Comintern cadres, Aleksandr Kogan, while the answers were possibly hand-written by Kim Il-sung himself. In both cases, the grammar looks odd, bringing us to the conclusion that neither of them were native speakers of Chinese. The questionnaire is dated January 1941. Pages nine and ten contain a draft translation of the questionnaire into Russian. The draft was checked on February 26, 1941 and used to create the final version of the translation, which occupies pages three and four. Two more copies of the final version constitute pages five through eight. Finally, pages one and two feature the above-mentioned reference letter signed by the four Comintern cadres. This file constitutes what is probably the first biography of Kim Il-sung. Since it is relatively short, the authors decided to include its full English translation here:

Top secret

REFERENCE

JIN RICHENG, a Korean, born in Korea in the city of Heijō,¹³ has an incomplete secondary education and was studying in a Chinese middle school in the city of Girin.¹⁴ His wife is a Korean; she is working as a dressmaker in partisan units. According to his questionnaire of 1941, Jin Richeng was arrested in 1929 by Chinese authorities and was released according to demands and after being vouched for by several people after spending 5 months in custody. Jin Richeng entered the CPC in 1931 in the county of An-du, Mukden¹⁵ province, being recommended by Li Qing-shan. This person is unknown to us. Prior to the spring of 1932, at the direction of the Party organisation, he joined the Army of "Salvation of the Fatherland" as a propagandist in Manchuria, which was under command of a famous deceased general Wang De-ling. In 1932,

¹¹ Ivan Petrovich Plyshevskiy (1907–1996). In January 1941 Plyshevskiy was an analyst (“senior politreferent”) in the Cadre Department of the Executive Committee of Comintern.

¹² Aleksandr Isaakovich Kogan (b. 1908). In January 1941 Kogan was an analyst (“referent”) in the Liaison Service of the Executive Committee of Comintern.

¹³ Heijō was the contemporary Japanese name for Pyongyang.

¹⁴ “Girin” is the one of the names given to the Jilin province, originating from Manchurian language.

¹⁵ Antu county (incorrectly transliterated as An-du in the document) belonged to Fengtian province of the Republic of China until 1929. In 1929, Nanjing created the Liaoning province and Antu county became a part of it. When Manchukuo was established in 1932, the county became a part of Fengtian province of this state. From 1934 until 1943 it belonged to Manchukuo’s Jiandao province. At the time of writing this article, Antu belongs to the Jilin province of the People’s Republic of China.

he was sent by the Special Eastern Manchurian party committee to Chinese partisan units in Manchuria. From this time, he fulfilled his duties as a commissar of Wang-qing partisan unit of the Second Corps, Chief of Staff and commissar of the Third Regiment and then a commander of the Second Column of the First Manchurian United Anti-Japanese Army. During his time in the party, as Jin Richeng writes in his questionnaire, he did not commit any political mistakes and was never subjected to party penalties.

CONCLUSION:

1. *Keep Jin Richeng as a political worker in partisan units in Manchuria.*
2. *It is necessary to find out the background of Jin Richeng's arrest in 1929. Why was he arrested, by whose command, and by whose attestations was he released?*

(signature) / VILKOV /

(signature) / ZYUZIN /

(signature) / PLYSHEVSKIY /

(signature) / KOGAN /

March 14, 1941.

Two copies printed

[The reference above letter was based on the following questionnaire completed in Chinese by Kim Il-sung himself.]

Questionnaire of directive staff worker Jin (Kim) Er-chen¹⁶

1. Surname and name: *Jin Richeng.*
2. Place of birth: *Pyongyang, Korea.*
3. Ethnicity: *Korean.*¹⁷
4. Level, location, and period of education: *I studied at the Yuwen middle school in the provincial capital of Jilin province in northeast China but I did not graduate.*
5. Family members' occupations and current locations: *Not applicable.*
6. Where were you and what kind of work were you doing during the Great Revolution of 1925-27? (Cover your organisation in detail and mention the names of the people with whom you worked.) *Not applicable.*
7. When, where, and in which army and under whose command did you serve?

¹⁶ The name is written in Russian.

¹⁷ Notably, Kim Il-sung used the word "Gaoli" to refer to Korea, instead of the then-standard "Chaoxian." The explanation would be that the word "Chaoxian" (K. *Chosŏn*, J. *Chōsen*) was chosen by the authorities of the Japanese Empire after the annexation of Korea – and Kim may have thought that using it could be perceived as solidarization with the country he fought against. Alternate name "Hanguo" (K. *Hanguk*, J. *Kankoku*), used before the annexation by the 1930s became thoroughly associated with right-wing part of the independence movement to which Kim did not belong. Thus, he chose the third name – "Gaoli" (K. *Koryŏ*, J. *Korai*) to refer to his ethnicity, which was also used in contemporary documents of the Communist Party of China to refer to ethnic Koreans. This name originated from the kingdom of Koryŏ which had existed on the Korean peninsula in 918-1392. Notably, decades later, when Kim Il-sung proposed a unification plan to South Korea, he also suggested the name Koryŏ for the unified state.

Before I joined the partisan unit in 1932, I joined the Army of National Salvation under Wang Delin as a propagandist, in accordance with the instructions the East Manchurian Special Committee.

8. When and where did you join the Chinese Communist Party? In which organisation did you serve and who was your guarantor? *In 1931, I joined the Party organisation in Antu, Fengtian¹⁸ province in the Northeast. I applied for a Party work assignment and joined the organisation of the Chinese Communist Party in the region of Antu of East Manchuria. The guarantor was Li Qingshan.*

9. Were you subjected to arrest by Japan, Manchukuo, or the Kuomintang? When and how were you released? *In 1929, I was arrested by the Kuomintang in Jilin. I was released due to a lack of real evidence and being vouched for by very many people who requested that I be freed.*

10. Who sent you to do Party work in partisan units in Manchuria? When and for how long were you in the United Army? What were your responsibilities? *In 1932, I was sent to work in the partisan units by Tong Changrong,¹⁹ of the East Manchurian Special Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and have been serving ever since as a political commissar of the Wangqing Anti-Japanese Partisan Battalion, Chief of Staff and political commissar of the Third regiment, Commander of the Sixth Division, Commander of the Second Area Army of the First Field Army.²⁰*

11. Did you make mistakes? Did you vacillate? Did you receive Party reprimands? If so, when, by whom, and why they were given? [No response.]

12. Were you a member of another Party or of a faction? *No.*

13. When were you selected for Party work? Who selected you? *I was doing Party work in the army. The political commissar of the First Field Army determined that I would participate in the Party Committee and would do Party work.*

14. What is the current assessment of the Party work you are doing *de facto*? [No response given]

15. If you are already married, list all information about your spouse. *My spouse is Korean. She works as a dressmaker in the partisan unit. She is a member of the Chinese Communist Party.*

¹⁸ As mentioned in note 33, Kim Il-sung's reference to the administrative division is incorrect, since as of 1931, Antu was a part of the Liaoning province.

¹⁹ Tong Changrong (whose name is crossed out in the original questionnaire) was assigned to work as a secretary in the East Manchurian Special Committee of the Chinese Communist Party after Liao Ruyuan, who had been tasked with the establishment of this committee, and later returned to the provincial committee of the CPC in November 1931 (*Wen shi ziliao xuanji* 2 1982, 14–39).

²⁰ These military titles are translated from Russian and thus sometimes are different with the variants used in the text of the article. “The Army of ‘Salvation of the Fatherland’” or “Army of National Salvation” is a variant of the translation of the National Salvation Army [*Jingwojun*]. “Manchurian United Anti-Japanese Army” is a variant of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army. The “third regiment” mentioned in the questionnaire belonged to the Second Army of the Northeast People's Revolutionary Army, while the “sixth division” belonged to the First Field Army of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army. The reorganization of the Northeast People Revolutionary Army into the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army in 1935 was related to the Comintern's shift towards the policy of the “United front” between the Communist and the Kuomintang.

16. Add any necessary questions to those stated above.

According to comrade Kogan, the questionnaire was filled in January 1941. (signature)²¹

Georgi Dimitrov's diary and Comintern documents allow us to reconstruct the preparation of these materials. On January 1, 1941, Kim Il-sung, An Kil, and Sō Ch'ōl presented their report to their Soviet supervisor (*Dongbei diqu geming lishi wenjian huiji 60*, 1990, 95-105). In the same month, Kim Il-sung filled in the questionnaire contained in his personal file. Judging by the annotation on the original questionnaire list, the person on duty, and who possibly personally interrogated Kim Il-sung, was Aleksandr Kogan. Later, Kogan returned from Khabarovsk to Moscow on February 19 to report on Manchurian partisans (Dimitrov 1997, 215). Over the course of five days, Dimitrov met with Kogan, Zyuzin, and Plyshevkiy, instructing them on Manchurian affairs (Dimitrov 1997, 215). Finally, on March 17, three days after the compilation of the reference letter on Kim Il-sung, Zyuzin reported to Dimitrov on leading cadres among the Manchurian partisans; Dimitrov assessed the situation as "very hard" [*golyamo neblagopoluchie*] (Dimitrov 1997, 217). Two months later, Vilkov, Plyshevsky, Zyuzin, and Kogan compiled a report entitled "The state of party organizations and partisan movement in Manchuria" (May 2, 1941) (Vilkov, Plyshevsky, Zyuzin, and Kogan 1941) wherein they twice mentioned Kim Il-sung as one of the partisan commanders, using the information from the report of Kim Il-sung, An Kil, and Sō Ch'ōl.

Although there were some questions from the Comintern about Kim Il-sung's biography, (*Lichnoye delo Tszin Zhi-chena 2*) they posed no obstacle to Kim's growing relationship with the Soviets. Soon after Dimitrov received the report on Kim and other partisans in February 1941, Soviet authorities planned to send Kim back to Manchuria with a team to track Wei Zhengming,²² a partisan leader who had been left behind in Manchukuo. This assignment clearly showed that the Soviets trusted Kim (Zhou 1991, 569). The Soviets eventually formed two teams – one under Kim Il-sung's command and one under command of another Korean partisan An Kil. On April 9, 1941, the team crossed the border with Manchukuo (Huo 2005, 201-202). On August 28, Kim Il-sung and a portion of his team came back to a training camp located in Soviet territory, while An's team stayed in Manchuria. Kim reported on the failure of the mission. They could not find Wei Zhengming as he had apparently died from an illness

²¹ This is written in Russian.

²² Wei Zhengming (1909-1941), was a prominent activist member of the Communist Party of China, who worked in Manchuria in the 1930s. As such, Wei subsequently occupied positions in the Harbin Party organization, secretary of the East Manchurian Special Committee of the Party and political officer of the Second Army of the Northeast People's Revolutionary Army. In 1935, Wei Zhengming went to Moscow to participate in the Seventh Congress of the Comintern. In March of 1936, he was appointed the secretary of the East Manchurian Committee of the Communist Party and political officer of the Second Army of the Northeast United Anti-Japanese Army, and after July 1936 occupied positions of the secretary of the South Manchurian committee of the CPC, Chairman of the Political Department of the First Field Army of the Northeast United Anti-Japanese Army and deputy commander of the First Field Army. After death of Yang Jingyu in February 1940, Wei Zhengming became the commander of the First Field Army. He died on March 8, 1941 (*Jinxin liubanjū Jilin zhongzou kanglian lu*).

(Zhou 1991, 620–621). On September 14, Kim Il-sung went back to Manchuria, where he met the rest of his unit and then returned with them to the USSR, arriving on November 12, 1941 (Huo 2005, 201–202).

While Kim's personal file generally corresponds with the established historical narrative, it does provide new insights into some parts of Kim's biography. Kim Il-sung was indeed involved in partisan fighting in Manchuria and had served as a commander of several units under the command of the Communist Party of China, of which he was a member. Notably, the questionnaire does not mention Kim's raid on the village of Poch'ŏnbo, despite Kim having an opportunity to do so in item 16 of the questionnaire. Later North Korean official discourse transformed this raid into one of the key events of the entire anti-Japanese movement²³ but as of 1941, even Kim Il-sung apparently considered it too insignificant to mention. There are, however, at least three new points one can derive from these documents. The first relates to Kim Il-sung's arrest in 1929, the second to his service in the National Salvation Army, and the third to his being admitted to the Communist Party of China.

In 1929, the seventeen year-old Kim Il-sung was arrested by the local authorities and spent several months in prison, which was almost certainly the reason why he did not graduate from Yuwen Middle School. Kim was imprisoned for joining a communist youth organisation headed by Hō So (Suh 1967, 266–267). A report²⁴ by Japanese Consul-General Kawagoe Shigeru to the Prime Minister Tanaka Giichi mentioned a "Korean Youth Communist Society" (*Chōsen Kyōsan seimen-kai*), listing a "Yuwen middle school student Kim Sōng-gye" as one of its members. Suh Dae-sook suggests that "Kim Sōng-gye" is a misspelling of Kim Il-sung's original name "Kim Sōng-ju", as the characters for "ju" (柱) and "gye" (桂) look similar. This explanation appears plausible. Kim's responses to the question in his personal file, however, complicate the narrative of this early arrest. His failure to explain his arrest raises several questions. If he had been imprisoned for his pro-Communist he would have clearly played the reason for his arrest to his advantage; he would have had no motivation to hide it from Soviet officials. Furthermore, Soviet General Lebedev wrote an assessment of Kim in 1948 in which he directly stated that Kim "has never been imprisoned" (Lebedev 1948, 1–4). The fact that Lebedev was aware of Kim's real biography suggests that there was something about the arrest and imprisonment which did not reflect positively on Kim. The most likely explanation is that many members of the Korean Youth Communist Society had questionable political backgrounds; some of them had belonged to groups later labelled "factionalists." For example, Yi Kūm-ch'ŏn was condemned as a members of the "Tuesday association," which was later condemned by the official DPRK historiography (Suh 1967, 267).²⁵ In 1931, Yi was detained by the local authorities and deported to Japanese-occupied Korea (*Pōmin ūl ūnnikē* 1931, 7).

In the questionnaire response, Kim Il-sung mentioned serving in an organisation

²³ One of many North Korea publications on the subject is *Chosŏn Rodongdang ryaksa* (1979).

²⁴ The document was later reprinted as a part of records of Japanese consulates in China and Manchukuo (*Gaimushō keisatsushū* 13.3, *Manshū no bu* 1997, 172–173).

²⁵ The source Suh provides is *Zai Kirin sōryōji-kan oyobi Tonka bunkan* (9, 640–9, 995, 10, 40–48, 10, 276–79).

called the “National Salvation Army” in 1932, which previously unknown to the academic community. As the readers could see from the next section of this article, while Kim’s memoirs claimed he cooperated with this organisation, he never stated being its regular serviceman. This army (its full name was the Chinese People’s National Salvation Army *Zhongguo guomin jinguojun*, hereafter referred to as CPNSA) was created in 1932, based on units under the command of Wang Delin (1873–1938). After a checkered career as gangster and bandit, Wang became a battalion commander in 1907 under Men Enyuan, the military governor (*dujun*) of the Jilin province. Wang created the CPNSA in January 1932 in the wake of the Kwantung Army seizure of Manchuria in 1931. Kim Il-sung’s service in the CPNSA was linked to Wang’s decision in 1932 to engage in an extensive cooperation between his core forces and local Communists. He appointed Li Yanlu his Chief of Staff and Zhou Baozhong as Chief of Main Staff in the High Command. He appointed several other communists to other important positions as well. In all, more than one-hundred members of the CPC joined the ranks of the CPNSA. Li and Zhou even created an illegal Party organisation in the CPNSA. This situation was met with disapproval by Kuomintang officials in Nanjing, as the Republican Chinese Government had ordered a purge of communists from the army. After receiving the order, Wang expelled many communists from the ranks of the army, including the entire unit of propagandists, where Kim Il-sung had served, as he testified in his questionnaire. The communists went on to create their own units (Xiao and Liu 1995, 127, 130–131).

When Kim Il-sung responded to the eighth question of the questionnaire, he mentioned Li Qingshan, the person who had sponsored his application to the Communist Party of China. He was not a prominent figure. Indeed, as is evident from the reference letter, even the Comintern cadres specializing in the anti-Japanese Communist movement in Manchukuo in the early 1940s did not know his name. Given that the questionnaire was written in Chinese, one cannot immediately deduce whether this person was Chinese or Korean. The Chinese reading of his name 李青山²⁶ is Li Qingshan but the Korean reading is Yi Ch’öng-san. Kim Il-sung’s memoirs, however, mention such a person and in translations his name is transliterated according to the Korean reading. While the memoirs themselves are heavily distorted,²⁷ the indication that Yi Ch’öng-san was Korean and not Chinese is likely reliable because Kim had no reason to lie about Yi’s nationality. Kim’s official memoir states that Yi Ch’öng-san was a member of the Wengqu²⁸ Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and refers to him as “an old revolutionary” (*rohyöngmyöngga*), implying that he was much older than Kim (*Kim Il-söng chöjakchöp*, 46 1996, 195). The only known individual whose biography may match that of Yi Ch’öng-san is Pyön Nak-kyu. Pak was a Korean independence activist who used the alias “Yi Ch’öng-san” and was present in Manchuria in 1931 (*Hanguk yöktae inmul chonghap chöngbo sisüt’em* 2008), but there are no known records of Pyön being a member of the Chinese

²⁶ The authors would like to express their gratitude to Professor Chen Sihong for verifying the characters.

²⁷ The distortion encompassed relatively small bits of Kim’s biography and grand historical events, such as the Soviet-Japanese war, where Japan’s defeat was mostly attributed to the “Korean People’s Revolutionary Army” of Kim Il-sung.

²⁸ Wengqu (瓮區) was a place located in the Yanji county [*xian*] of Jilin province in Manchuria.

Communist Party. Party membership, however, is about the only confirmed fact about the Yi Ch'ŏng-san who recommended Kim Il-sung to the Party. Unless some new sources emerge, the biography of this man will be largely impossible.

Conclusion

In the nearly ninety years since the beginning of Kim Il-sung's political career it has proven extraordinarily difficult for historians to establish even the most basic timeline of his life before 1945. This it has been especially true for his early adulthood, a period, which, as it was mentioned above, Dae-sook Suh described as the "gap from the end of Kim's education in 1929 to his active participation in guerrilla activities in 1932" (Suh 1988, 6). "The Personal File of Jin Richeng" is a brief but important document that enables us first to further illuminate the inaccuracies of the official North Korean state narrative of the early life of Kim Il-sung and second to begin to construct a narrative of these hitherto poorly known years in Kim's political biography.

A key text in the North Korean state biography of Kim Il-sung is the "With the Century" series that comprises Kim's memoirs. In addition to incorrectly dating Kim's arrest record (*Kim Ilsŏng chŏjakchŏp*, 45 1996, 361; *Kim Ilsŏng chŏjakchŏp*, 46 1996, 24), these texts also invoke multiple arrests that Kim did not mention in his Soviet interrogation (*Kim Ilsŏng chŏjakchŏp* 45 1996, 258; *Kim Ilsŏng chŏjakchŏp*, 46 1996, 107, 200). One would expect Kim to highlight his arrests as testament to his revolutionary commitment; either he wanted to conceal them, or more likely, they never happened and Kim's responses to the Soviet interrogation were truthful.

Kim's file also raises questions about the official account of Kim Il-sung's service in the CPNSA. The official memoirs suggest decided to join the CPNSA on his own initiative so that his unit could benefit from the status membership might convey and to avoid a possible conflict with the CPNSA. "With the Century" further claims that a certain Commander Yu invited Kim. There is no reference to the fact that Tong Changrong sent Kim Il-sung or of the East Manchurian Special Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. The memoirs presented Kim Il-sung as an independent actor, claiming that the East Manchurian Special Committee sent "seven or eight outstanding communists" to work in the CPNSA, while "we," that is, Kim Il-sung, sent some Koreans (*Kim Ilsŏng chŏjakchŏp*, 46 1996, 281). As for work in Communist Union of Chinese Youth, "With the Century" indicated that it was not Kim himself who requested that assignment but that rather he was sent there by the Comintern, probably meaning employees of the Comintern communication post in Harbin. Furthermore, Kim claimed that he was immediately appointed as the secretary of the organization of the Union of Chinese Youth in East Jilin (*Kim Ilsŏng chŏjakchŏp*, 46 1996, 127). The memoirs presented Tong Changrong not as Kim's superior but as a man whom Kim saved from imprisonment, who valued the experience of 'Korean comrades', and who asked Kim Il-sung for help (*Kim Ilsŏng chŏjakchŏp* 46, 1996, 241–242, 251–253]. In contradistinction, the personal file suggests that in this period Kim acted at the behest of Chinese communists

and not as the independent Korean national hero of the North Korean state narrative.

Kim's official memoir identified Yi Ch'öngsan only as an old revolutionary. In this telling, Kim Il-sung talked to him in Minyuegou in Jiandao and later met him again and participated in two meetings in Yi's home (*Kim Il-söng chöjakchöp*, 46 1996, 194–195, 242–244; *Kim Il-söng chöjakchöp*, 47 1997, 147). Similarly, "With the Century" indicates that some Korean Communists in Manchuria joining the ranks of the Chinese Communist Party but there is no reference to Kim Il-sung himself being a member, limiting the narrative to statements about Kim Il-sung's links with the CCP and its organizations or his work as "a leading functionary of a CCP organization" without reference to his party membership (*Kim Il-söng chöjakchöp*, 46 1996, 67–68). Here too "The Personal File of Jin Richeng" highlights Kim Il-sung's subordinate political status in contrast to the official memoir in which he consistently emerges as an independent revolutionary figure.

There are a number of issues that "The Personal File of Jin Richeng" cites but does not explain, such as the nature of the Korean Youth Communist Society in Jilin, the reason for Kim Il-sung's release from prison, the biography of Yi Ch'öng-san. Despite these vague points, however, a new biography of Kim Il-sung in this period as revised in light of the file may be as follows: after his release from prison in 1929, he joined the Communist movement, became a member of the Communist Youth League, and was sent to Antu as a secretary to the League's local organization. When the Kwantung Army seized Manchuria in 1931, Kim joined the Chinese Communist Party on Yi Ch'öng-san's recommendation and was sent as a propagandist to the National Salvation Army of Wang Delin. After the Kuomintang forced the purge of propagandists from the Army's ranks, Kim started to participate in the partisan movement. And yet by 1941, Soviet authorities and functionaries did not believe Kim Il-sung to be a significant or promising figure and moreover, Comintern leadership did not positively assess the principal Manchurian partisan cadres.

The authors hope that future research will uncover new facts of these subjects and will continue to fill gaps in our knowledge of Kim Il-sung's biography.

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