

## A STUDY OF SOVIET INFLUENCE ON THE FORMATION OF THE NORTH KOREAN ARMY

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This article examines the influence of Soviet Army experience and tradition on the formation of the army of North Korea in the late 1940s–1950s. As North Korea itself was born out of the Soviet occupation zone, the USSR exercised a strong influence and the Korean People’s Army was largely shaped in the Soviet image.

The author analyses North Korean military regulations, unit structure, ranks, the political officer system and Party organisations in the army. The article’s findings are that the KPA was moulded according to the Soviet model, borrowing elements of its structure from different eras of Soviet history, including those that predated the creation of the North Korean state. Although some elements of its Soviet origin disappeared over time, it would not be an exaggeration to say the North Korean army is still a Soviet-type one.

Keywords: Korean People’s Army, North Korean army, Red Army, Soviet-North Korean relations

The army plays an extremely important role in North Korean politics and society. Some scholars, such as Michael J. Seth, go so far as to call the DPRK “a nationalist-militarist state.”<sup>1</sup> Irrespective of whether such an assessment is accurate or not, most would agree that studying the military of North Korea is necessary in order to understand the social and political structure of this country.

Since the chronic lack of information sources is one of the biggest problems,

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Seth, *A Concise History of Modern Korea: From the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 218.

if not the biggest problem, of North Korean studies, one possible approach would be to study some general patterns and specifics of communist armies, which manifested themselves in the DPRK as well. In order to do that, one should compare the North Korean army with the Soviet army for two reasons: first, the USSR was the country that created the North Korean state, and second, it was the country that largely served as an example to the entire communist bloc.

The North Korean army formally came into being on February 8, 1948 in the Soviet occupation zone in northern Korea, several months before its counterpart—the National Army of the Republic of Korea—was established in Seoul. The USSR was preparing to create a communist state, which was supposed to follow the Soviet example, and the army, fittingly called “the Korean People’s Army” (KPA), was created according to the Soviet model as well.

This article is dedicated to a comparative study of the North Korean and Soviet armies, focusing on how the latter influenced the former. As the article deals with the history of an organisation, the author discusses unit and rank structure, and the rules and regulations of both armies as well as such uniquely communist phenomena as political officers and party organisations in the military. Strategy, tactics, weaponry, military culture and traditions are not discussed in this article.

Research on this subject has remained virtually non-existent. Existing works on the history of the Red Army-KPA relations, such as Kim and Min’s “On the Arms Trade between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the Soviet Union in 1949 and 1950”<sup>2</sup> deal exclusively with the Soviet-North Korean arms trade, while ignoring the social aspect completely.

The most likely reason is that such a study would require a researcher to read both Russian and Korean as well as to take an interest in military affairs. As such people are rare, to the author’s knowledge, the only person who was doing similar research was a Soviet officer Georgiy Plotnikov. Unfortunately, the majority of his work is lost because Plotnikov died before he published any of his findings. Hence, we can learn of his work only from interviews Andrei Lankov conducted with him in the early 1990s.

Many scholars have assumed that the Soviet influence on North Korea was immense to begin with. However, this conclusion has never been based on a direct comparison between the two military systems, but rather on general impressions and the ‘common sense’ logic of researchers. Yet the work of a historian is not just to find general tendencies, but to explain them in precise detail—and that is exactly the purpose of this article.

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Kim and Kyuonhyuon Min, “On the Arms Trade between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the Soviet Union in 1949 and 1950,” *The Historian* 77 (2015): 518–536.

This article provides a detailed and comprehensive comparison between the Soviet Red Army and the KPA. In doing so, I found out, among other things, that sometimes the North Koreans, rather than copying contemporary Soviet institutions, replicated institutions and structures which had existed in the early USSR and which had been abolished more than a decade before the creation of the North Korean state. To my knowledge, no published research has ever mentioned this.

Studying the North Korean military is not an easy task as the DPRK tends to restrict access to almost all information related to its military. To the author's knowledge, the DPRK has not published a single source since the mid-1980s containing even basic information such as a list of military ranks in the KPA. Hence, the author had to collect a number of sources, which have been rarely, if ever, used before.

First, the author used the collections of the National Institute of Korean History (NIKH), located in Kwach'ŏn, South Korea. The NIKH has a vast collection of Soviet and North Korean documents, a portion of which was captured by United Nations forces during the Korean War, and another portion that was copied from Russian archives after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Second, the Russian State Library has a collection of documents which were originally given by North Koreans to the Soviet Embassy and which became accessible to the public once communist rule ended in Russia. To the author's knowledge, these documents have not been used by any researcher.

Finally, the author used official North Korean publications. Even though in many cases these publications serve propaganda purposes, they not only contain useful factual data but can also be remarkably revealing if studied carefully and compared with other sources.

## **RULES AND REGULATIONS**

The life of a military man is strictly regulated by a set of internal rules and regulations. The North Korean army is no exception to this rule. In the DPRK, the most basic regulations are called "Internal service regulations" (*Naemu kyujŏng*), while the second most basic ones are "Disciplinary regulations" (*Kiryul kyujŏng*), which serve as a de-facto supplement to the Military Penal Code. This system was borrowed from the Soviet Army (the first set of rules was called *Ustav vnutrennej sluzhby* in Russian and the second one, *Distsiplinarnyj ustav*).

In his interview with Andrei Lankov, Georgiy Plotnikov stated that "Up to the end of the 1950s [the KPA] continued to basically blindly copy the Soviet

example. The rules and regulations of the North Korean army were almost literally translated from their Soviet originals.”<sup>3</sup> As is stated above, Plotnikov never published his research, so we will never know the sources on which his assessment was based. Hence, one should examine contemporary North Korean documents in order to check his claim. Unfortunately, such documents are classified and hence are extremely hard to access for an outsider. However, some of the regulations adopted in the 1940–50s can be found in the archives.

The first of them are “Regulations of the Korean People’s Army”, published in 1949 (“*Naemu kyujǒng*,” 1949). Although this document is classified by the NIKH simply as “Regulations” (*kyujǒng*), by closely observing the first page one may notice the mark “to be used in training” (*undongyong*). Thus, these regulations were not a real set of rules, but rather a document for military training. Nevertheless, this document is relevant for this article’s topic, as it shows the overwhelming extent of the Soviet influence on North Korea in the late 1940s.

Basically, these “regulations” were nothing more than Soviet originals roughly translated and even more roughly adapted for the DPRK. They featured such distinctly Soviet ranks as “Chief Marshal of a military arm (air force, artillery etc.)” and “Generalissimo”. Even the text of the pledge of allegiance in the “regulations” was almost identical to the Soviet original.

This tradition of following the USSR was extended to the real regulations as well, as documents from the collection of the Russian State Library show. In both the “Internal service regulations” and “Disciplinary regulations” from 1955, we can find numerous proofs that the documents were initially translated from Russian.

Here are a few examples:

1) North Korean “Internal service regulations” stated that “military personnel should use the word *tangsin*, while addressing each other.”<sup>4</sup> To understand why this phrase is a sign of Russian influence, we need a short excursus into the grammar of the Russian and Korean languages. Unlike English, both Russian and Korean have special grammatical ways to show respect or disrespect to one’s interlocutor. In Russian it is usually done by choosing a second person pronoun: “ty” is a more informal form, whilst “Vy” is considered to be an official and polite one. Thus, “addressing someone using the word ‘Vy’” means “speaking politely”

<sup>3</sup> The quotation follows the unpublished script of Andrei Lankov’s interview with Georgiy Plotnikov conducted on February 1, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> *Chosŏn minjujuŭi inmin konhwaguk inmin’gun naemu kyujǒng* [Internal service regulations of the People’s Army of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea] (P’yŏngyang: Minjok powisŏng kunsu ch’ulp’anbu, 1955), 26.

in Russian.<sup>5</sup> Korean grammar is more complex and politeness is conveyed by many ways, the most important of which is the form of the verb used at the end of the sentence. Unofficial speech among equals is commonly called *panmal* (casual style), moderately polite, official speech is normally referred to as *chondaemal* (deferential style).<sup>6</sup> Korean, like Russian also has different second person pronouns, of which *tangsŏn*, is, indeed, considered politer. However, this word is never used to define one's pattern of speech and thus the phrase "use the word *tangsŏn*" is, obviously, a literal translation of the standard Russian phrase "use the word 'Vy'" (a correct Korean equivalent would be "to use *chondaemal*").

2) The USSR, like most European countries, used different names for the ranks of ground forces and the navy, while North Korea, like other East Asian countries, did not. Both army colonels and navy captains in North Korea are referred to as *sangjwa*. However, navy officers in the Regulations always have the prefix "navy" (*haegun*), which looks rather unnatural and odd.<sup>7</sup> The reason for this is that the document was translated from Russian. Russian-Korean dictionaries, in order to show the distinctions, absent in Korean, translated navy ranks using the "navy" prefix, as the translator was obviously influenced by the dictionaries.

3) The document also states that "when a general or a person of higher rank addresses his/her subordinates, he/she addresses them with the words, 'Are you healthy, comrades?', while soldiers standing in line respond: 'We wish you health.'"<sup>8</sup> In both English and Korean such a greeting sounds extremely odd. The true reason why such a seemingly bizarre form was adopted is that the Russian standard greeting "*Zdravstvujte!*" literally means "I wish you health" and thus the standard response, used in the Soviet Army (*Zdraviya zhelajem*) literally also means "We wish you health".

This, perhaps the most blatant Soviet influence, however, did not survive for long and in the modern KPA a commanding officer would, of course, address his subordinates with a simple "How are you?" (*Annyŏng hasimnikka?*).

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Cubberley, *Russian: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 355.

<sup>6</sup> Ho-min Sohn, *Korean Language in Culture and Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 134.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 186–187.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 23.

### MILITARY STRUCTURE

Apart from the regulations, a very important factor in studying a military institution is to examine its structure, since an army is a social unit organised according to a very strict and formal hierarchical system.<sup>9</sup> The following table is a comparison between the hierarchical structure of North Korean and Soviet military units; the author also included data regarding the Chinese and pre-1945 Japanese unit system. These additions are important since it is often assumed that the Japanese and Chinese military systems exercised much influence over the emerging North Korean military. However, in fact Chinese influence was marginal, while the supposed Japanese influence hardly existed at all.<sup>10</sup>

North Korea	USSR	PRC	Imperial Japan
(De-facto non-existent)	Front/Military region <i>Front/Voyennyj okrug</i>	Military Region <i>Junqu</i>	General Army <i>Sogun</i>
	Army <i>Armiya</i>	Group Army <i>Jituanjun</i>	Area Army <i>Homengun</i>
Corps <i>Kundan</i>	Corps <i>Korpus</i>		Army <i>Gun</i>
Division <i>Sadan</i>	Division <i>Diviziya</i>	Division/Brigade <i>Shi/Lü</i>	Corps <i>Shudan</i>
Brigade <i>Ryodan</i>	Brigade <i>Brigada</i>		Division <i>Shidan</i>
Regiment <i>Ryöndae</i>	Regiment <i>Polk</i>	Regiment <i>Tuan</i>	Brigade <i>Ryodan</i>
			Group <i>Dan</i>
Battalion <i>Taetae</i>	Battalion <i>Batalyon</i>	Battalion <i>Ying</i>	Regiment <i>Rentai</i>
Company <i>Chungdae</i>	Company <i>Rota</i>	Company <i>Lian</i>	Squadron <i>Sendai</i>
Platoon <i>Sodae</i>	Platoon <i>Vzvod</i>	Platoon <i>Pai</i>	Battalion <i>Daitai</i>
Squad <i>Pundae</i>	Squad <i>Otdeleniye</i>	Squad <i>Ban</i>	Company <i>Chütai</i>
			Platoon <i>Shötai</i>
			Squad <i>Buntai</i>

<sup>9</sup> Giuseppe Caforio, ed., *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military* (Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media, 2006), 16.

<sup>10</sup> Caforio, *ibid.*, 16.

As one can clearly see, the North Korean system is almost a carbon copy of the Soviet system, as all ranks from squad to corps are exactly the same in both countries. However, upon consulting the documents from the 1950s, one can see that originally the two systems were even more similar: although the real North Korean armed forces never had military fronts such large units were formally included in the 1950s regulations, which duly described the rights and responsibilities of “army” (*chipdan’gun*) and “Front/Military region” (*chönsön/kun’gu*) commanders.<sup>11</sup> The only reason for this was that such large units existed in the USSR, and the person who composed the regulations translated literally what was initially written in Russian documents.

## MILITARY RANKS

Nothing defines a position of a soldier more than his/her rank, as most—if not all—armies require total obedience to the orders of one’s superior. Thus, in order to better understand the structure of an army, one must study its military ranks.

### 1. 1948: Military positions

Since North Koreans used Soviet-style insignia, many researchers—both contemporary and modern—have wrongly assumed that these insignia denoted similar ranks as well.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the fact that the North Korean army had no military ranks escaped the view of many Korean and non-Korean researchers.<sup>13</sup>

However, a closer examination of contemporary documents reveals the absence of ranks. In an NIKH-published series of North Korean documents, one can find an instruction called “Regulations regarding wages of the Korean People’s Army personnel,”<sup>14</sup> which features no ranks. Moreover, the table

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<sup>11</sup> *Chosön minjujuüi inmin konghwaguk inmin’gun kiryul kyujöng* [Disciplinary regulations of the People’s Army of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea] (P’yöngyang: Minjok powisöng kunsu ch’ulp’anbu, 1955), 20-21.

<sup>12</sup> Edward M. Almond, *Uniform Insignia, Equipment: North Korean Army* (Tokyo: General Headquarters, Far Eastern Command), 1950.

<sup>13</sup> Chang Chun-ik, *Pukhan inmin kundaesa* [Military history of the People’s Army of North Korea] (Seoul: Chimmundang, 1991), 479.

<sup>14</sup> *Chosön minjujuüi inmin konghwaguk minjok powisöng* [Ministry of National Defence of the DPRK]; “*Chosön inmin’gun kunmuja ponggüp kyujöng sönp’o e taebayö*” [Declaration of the regulations regarding salaries of the KPA personnel], in *Pukhan kwan’gye saryo chip* (Historical materials on North Korea), vol. 8 (Kwach’ön: Kuksa p’yönoch’an wiwönhoe, 1989), 640.

“Military positions of commanders of the Korean People’s Army,”<sup>15</sup> which was originally one of the documents captured by the UN command, is further proof that in 1948, when the creation of the KPA was announced, it did not have any ranks.

Positions, such as “platoon commander” or “deputy regiment commander” did exist, and it was a soldier’s position, not rank, which was marked by his/her insignia. Army positions were divided into the following five subgroups:

- **High-rank commanders** (*keogŭp chibwigwan*): Minister of National Defence (*minjok powisang*),<sup>16</sup> Chief of General Staff (*ch’ong ch’ammojang*) / Vice Minister of National Defence (*pusang*), Division commander (*sadanjang*) / Brigade commander (*ryöndaejang*) / Academy commandant (*hakeyojang*).

- **Senior-rank commanders** (*sanggŭp chibwigwan*): Division’s Chief of Staff (*sadan ch’ammojang*), Regiment commander (*ryöndaejang*), Deputy regiment commander (*pu ryöndaejang*) Independent battalion commander (*tongnip taedaejang*), Battalion commander (*taedaejang*).

- **Middle-rank commanders** (*chunggŭp chibwikwan*): Deputy battalion commander (*pduae taejang*) / Independent company commander (*tongnip chungdaejang*), Company commander (*chungdaejang*), Deputy company commander (*pu chungdaejang*) / Independent platoon commander (*tongnip sodaejang*), Platoon commander (*sodaejang*)

- **Junior-rank commanders** (*bagŭp chibwigwan*): Foreman (*t’ungmujang*), Deputy platoon commander (*pu sodaejang*), Squad commander (*pundaejang*), Deputy squad commander (*pu pundaejang*)

- **Soldiers** (*pyöngsa*): Senior soldier (*sangdŭngbyöng*), Soldier (*pyöngsa*)

Such a system is extremely rare, but not unique. A similar system, viewed by contemporary leadership as being more “democratic”, existed in early Soviet Union and apparently became the prototype for the early North Korean system. The following table compares them both. The number in the first column shows the soldier’s numbered “category”—this system was used in both North Korea

<sup>15</sup> “6·25 tangsi Pukhan inmingun changgyo kyegŭpp’yo”,

[Table of military ranks of North Korean officers during the Korean War], Yonhap News, accessed January 9, 2017,

[http://app.yonhapnews.co.kr/YNA/Basic/article/ArticlePhoto/YIBW\\_showArticlePhotoPopup.aspx?contents\\_id=PYH20130624098300013](http://app.yonhapnews.co.kr/YNA/Basic/article/ArticlePhoto/YIBW_showArticlePhotoPopup.aspx?contents_id=PYH20130624098300013).

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that in communist countries (unlike, for example, Britain or the United States), the Minister of National Defence and later the Minister of the People’s Armed Forces are positions occupied by high-ranking officers, not civilians. The author would like to thank Peter Ward for pointing this out to him.



and the USSR.<sup>17</sup>

	Red Army (1924-1935)		North Korean army (as of 1948)	
14	<b>High-rank commanders</b>	Front commander Army commander District commander Member of the district's revolutionary council	(None)	
13		Deputy district commander	<b>High-rank commanders</b>	Minister of National Defence
12		Corps commander Corps' military commissioner Deputy army commander and equated positions		Chief of General Staff Vice Minister of national Defence
11		Division commander Division's military commissioner		Division commander Brigade commander Academy commandant
10		Deputy division commander Brigade commander		Division's Chief of Staff
9	Regiment commander Regiment's military commissioner	Regiment commander		
8	<b>Senior-rank commanders</b>	Deputy regiment commander Independent battalion commander	<b>Senior-rank commanders</b>	Deputy regiment commander Independent battalion commander
7		Battalion commander Battalion's military commissioner		Battalion commander
6		Deputy battalion commander Battalion's political guide Independent company commander		Deputy battalion commander Independent company commander
5	<b>Middle-rank commanders</b>	Company commander Company political guide	<b>Middle-rank commanders</b>	Company commander
4		Deputy company commander Independent platoon commander		Deputy company commander Independent platoon commander
3		Platoon commander		Platoon commander
2	<b>Junior-rank commanders</b>	Foreman Deputy platoon commander	<b>Junior-rank commanders</b>	Foreman Deputy platoon commander Squad commander Deputy squad commander
1		Squad commander Team commander		
	<b>Soldiers</b>	Soldier of the Red Army	<b>Soldiers</b>	Senior soldier Soldier

<sup>17</sup> "O znakah razlichija v RKKA (1918-1943)" [Rank insignia in the Red Army, 1918-1943], accessed May 24, 2016, <http://rkka.ru/history/znak/main.htm>.

One can observe many close similarities in these two systems. First, both armies called their NCOs, officers and generals “commanders” (K. *chihwigan*, R. *komandir*). Second, these “commanders” were divided into four groups called “high-rank,” “senior-rank,” “middle-rank,” and “junior-rank”. Finally, the usage of a numbered “category” system often corresponding to the same rank is further evidence of direct Soviet influence.

Apart from the DPRK and the pre-1935 USSR,<sup>18</sup> China and Albania were two other communist countries that used not to have military ranks. China did not have ranks up to 1955 and abolished them again in 1965, following the spirit of the Cultural Revolution. The ranks were re-introduced in 1988 under Deng Xiaoping. The Chinese military reform was more radical than the Soviet one, since the Chinese abolished rank insignia as well (the Soviets and the North Koreans never did). Albania, following the Chinese example, abolished the rank system in 1966 and did not restore it up until 1991.

As for North Korea, the most unorthodox thing about its military reform was that it adopted not the contemporary Soviet system, but rather a much earlier one, which had been abolished years before the DPRK was created. While the documents do not provide us with a reason, one may speculate that since the KPA was introduced as the “creation of Commander Kim Il-sung (Kim Il-sŏng)’s People’s guerrilla units” as early as on their first parade,<sup>19</sup> the Soviet advisers might have wanted the new army to be rankless as the guerrilla units were. Since the army was not just rankless, it was rankless in a very specific—old Soviet—way, we can surmise that this change was designed by the Soviets as well and was not an initiative of the former members of guerrilla units themselves.

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<sup>18</sup> For completeness’ sake, it should be noted that Soviet puppet regimes in Mongolia, Tuva and the Russian Far East used not to have ranks as well. Mongolia introduced military ranks in 1936, Tuva in 1940–41, while the Far Eastern Republic was absorbed into Soviet Russia in 1922, while its army still did not have any ranks. See “Mongolia 1924–1992 (People’s Republic)”, accessed December 16, 2016,

[http://uniforminsignia.org/index.php?option=com\\_insigniasearch&Itemid=53&state=235&search\\_id=main](http://uniforminsignia.org/index.php?option=com_insigniasearch&Itemid=53&state=235&search_id=main); Buyan Mongush. “Tuvinskaya Narodno-Revolyutsionnaya armiya. Ot otryada kur’yerov do kavalerijskogo polka. 1921–1944” (Tuvan People’s Revolutionary Army, from a squad of couriers to a cavalry regiment, 1921–1944), *Staryj Tseihgan* 56 (2013): 58–69;

“Narukavnye znaki razlichiya Narodno-Revolyutsionnoj Armii Dal’nevostochnoj Respubliki” (Sleeve insignia of the People’s Revolutionary Army of the Far Eastern Republic), accessed December 16, 2016, <http://www.opocuu.com/nra-dvr-ins.htm>

<sup>19</sup> “Kim II Sung addresses North Korean Army on their second Anniversary at Pyongyang Rail Road Station,” accessed May 24, 2016, [http://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675028811\\_Kim-II-Sung-on-North-Korean-Armys-Anniversary\\_Tower-of-Liberation\\_Army-bands](http://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675028811_Kim-II-Sung-on-North-Korean-Armys-Anniversary_Tower-of-Liberation_Army-bands). It should be noted, however, that the description of the video is an inaccurate one: it features the very first parade of the KPA.

## 2. Introduction of military ranks

It is sometimes stated that the DPRK introduced the rank system on December 31, 1952.<sup>20</sup> This is not completely true. The introduction of ranks was done in two stages. The first one took place apparently in July or August 1949, when the ranks of privates and NCOs were introduced. We do not know the exact date, since the order of the Ministry of National Defence “Proclamation on regulations regarding wages of the personnel of the Korean People’s Army of the Ministry of National Defence of the DPRK”<sup>21</sup> published in July 1949 does not mention any ranks, and *Rodong Sinmun* first mentions the rank of an NCO on August 19, 1949.<sup>22</sup> However, we can surmise that the introduction of ranks occurred between these two events.

The second stage took place on December 31, 1952, when the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly published its decree “on the introduction of military ranks to the high-ranking commanders and officers of the Korean People’s Army.” In a rather unorthodox move, this document was published by the North Korean authorities in the *Korean Central Yearbook*, which is not classified (*Chosŏn chungang nyŏn’gam* 1954, 48).

The decree established the following hierarchy:

- **Marshals** (*wŏnsu*): Marshal of the DPRK (*Chosŏn Minjujuŭi inmin konghwaguk wŏnsu*), Vice-Marshal of the DPRK (*Chosŏn minjujuŭi inmin konghwaguk ch’asu*)
- **Generals** (*changnyŏng*): General of the Army (*taejang*), Lieutenant General (*chungjang*), Major General (*sojang*)
- **Officers** (*kan’gwan*): Senior Colonel (*taejwa*), Colonel (*sangjwa*), Lieutenant Colonel (*chungjwa*), Major (*sojwa*), Captain (*taewi*), Senior Lieutenant (*sangwi*), Lieutenant (*chungwi*), Junior Lieutenant (*sowi*)
- **Non-commissioned officers** (*basagwan*): Master Sergeant (*t’ŭngmusangsa*), Senior Sergeant (*sangsa*), Sergeant (*chungsā*), Junior Sergeant (*basā*)
- **Soldiers** (*pyŏngsa*): Corporal (*sangdŭngbyŏng*), Private (*chŏnsa*)

<sup>20</sup> “Kunsa ch’ingho” [Military rank], in *Pukhan chisik sajŏn* [Dictionary of information regarding North Korea], accessed May 24, 2016, <https://www.uniedu.go.kr/uniedu/home/brd/bbsatcl/nknow/view.do?id=25024&mid=SM00000174&limit=10&page=2>.

<sup>21</sup> *Minjok ponisŏng*, “Ponggŭp kyujŏng sŏnp’oe taehayŏ,” 640.

<sup>22</sup> “Rodongja tŭl iŏssŏttŏn kŭ ka usuhan ttangk’ŭbyŏng ŭro (chŏnch’abudae Ch’oe Ki-dŏk chungsa)” (They were workers and now are exemplary tankmen: Sergeant Ch’oe Ki-dŏk of the Mechanised Corps), *Rodong sinmun*, August 19, 1949, 3.

Although this system has undergone a few changes, most of it remains unaltered until the present day. As in the Soviet Union, the ranks of officer and general were divided into military arms, so one could be, for example, “a senior lieutenant of the signal corps” or “a colonel of artillery”. The infantry, probably due to being the largest arm, did not use such designations, so a one-star general of the infantry would simply be “Major General”. Finally, the Marshal and the Vice-Marshal were considered to be above the entire army, so they were not attributed to any arm either.

The definite article in the previous sentence has been used because since the 1950s North Korea has had only one Marshal, Kim Il-sung, and only one Vice-Marshal, Ch’oe Yong-gŏn, the Minister of National Defence. In 1953, the latter was clearly seen as Kim Il-sung’s second-in-command, and one may speculate that the rank of Vice-Marshal—unique to the communist bloc—was created to stress his authority and position as the second most important person in the country.<sup>23</sup>

The existence of the rank of Vice-Marshal, however, was the only major difference between the North Korean and Soviet military ranks. As can be seen from the following table, the new rank system was very similar to the contemporary Soviet one.<sup>24</sup>

North Korea	Soviet Union
(None)	Generalissimo of the Soviet Union <i>Generalissimus Sovetskogo Sojuza</i>
Marshal of the DPRK <i>Chosŏn Minjujuŭi Inmin Konghwaguk wŏnsu</i>	Marshal of the Soviet Union / Chief Marshal of a military arm <i>Marshal Sovetskogo Sojuza / Glavnyj marsbal roda vojsk</i>
Vice-Marshal of the DPRK <i>Chosŏn Minjujuŭi Inmin Konghwaguk ch’asu</i>	(None)
General of the Army <i>Taejang</i>	General of the Army / Marshal of a military arm <i>General armii /</i> <i>Marsbal roda vojsk</i>

<sup>23</sup> Fyodor Tertitskiy, “The Ascension of the Ordinary Man: How the Personality Cult of Kim Il-sung Was Constructed (1945–1974),” *Acta Koreana*, 18 (2015): 217.

<sup>24</sup> “Znaki različija zvanij voennosluzhashchih Krasnoj (Sovetskoj) Armii 1943-54gg.: Rjadovye, mladshij komandnyj i nachal’stvujushchij sostav” [Rank insignia of the military personnel of the Red (Soviet) Army in 1943-55: Privates and non-commissioned officers], accessed May 24, 2016, <http://army.armor.kiev.ua/forma/rkka-43-54-01.php>;

“Znaki različija zvanij voennosluzhashchih Krasnoj (Sovetskoj) Armii 1943-54gg.: Srednij i starshij komandnyj i nachal’stvujushchij sostav” [Rank insignia of the military personnel of the Red (Soviet) Army in 1943-55: Officers], accessed May 24, 2016, <http://army.armor.kiev.ua/forma/rkka-43-54-02.php>;

“Znaki različija zvanij voennosluzhashchih Krasnoj (Sovetskoj) Armii 1943-54gg.: Vysshij komandnyj i nachal’stvujushchij sostav” [Rank insignia of the military personnel of the Red (Soviet) Army in 1943-55: Generals], accessed May 24, 2016, <http://army.armor.kiev.ua/forma/rkka-43-54-03.php>.

(None)	Colonel General <i>General-polkovnik</i>
Lieutenant General <i>Chungjang</i>	Lieutenant General <i>General-lejtenant</i>
Major General <i>Sojang</i>	Major General <i>General-major</i>
Senior Colonel <i>Taechwa</i>	(None)
Colonel <i>Sangchwa</i>	Colonel <i>Polkovnik</i>
Lieutenant Colonel <i>Chungchwa</i>	Lieutenant Colonel <i>Podpolkovnik</i>
Major <i>Sochwa</i>	Major <i>Major</i>
Captain <i>Taewi</i>	Captain <i>Kapitan</i>
Senior Lieutenant <i>Sangwi</i>	Senior Lieutenant <i>Starshij lejtenant</i>
Lieutenant <i>Chungwi</i>	Lieutenant <i>Lejtenant</i>
Junior Lieutenant <i>Sowi</i>	Junior Lieutenant <i>Mladshij lejtenant</i>
Master Sergeant <i>T'ukmusangsa</i>	Master Sergeant <i>Starshina</i>
Senior Sergeant <i>Sangsa</i>	Senior Sergeant <i>Starshij serzhant</i>
Sergeant <i>Chungsa</i>	Sergeant <i>Serzhant</i>
Junior Sergeant <i>Hasa</i>	Junior Sergeant <i>Mladshij serzhant</i>
Corporal <i>Sangdŭngbyŏng</i>	Corporal <i>Efritor</i>
Private <i>Chŏnsa</i>	Private <i>Ryadovoj</i>

In the following years, the North Korean authorities implemented additional reforms, and some of these have brought this system even closer to the Soviet prototype. First, the three-star rank of Colonel General (*sangjang*) was introduced later, making an Army General a four-star rank as in the Soviet Union. The author managed to find a source—the collection of the DPRK’s laws and regulations from 1961—that tells us the exact date when this reform was implemented: April 23, 1955.<sup>25</sup>

Second, the rank of Generalissimo of the DPRK was conferred on Kim Il-sung on April 13, 1992;<sup>26</sup> this rank was probably introduced shortly before.

<sup>25</sup> *Chosŏn minjujuŭi inmin konghwaguk pŏpkyu chip* [Laws of the DPRK] (P’yŏngyang: Kungnip ch’ulp’ansa, 1961).

<sup>26</sup> “Uri tang kwa uri inmin ŭi widaehan suryŏng Kim Il-sŏng tongji ege Chosŏn minjujuŭi inmin

For completeness sake, we should mention other North Korean rank reforms. The rank of Vice-Marshal of the DPRK was renamed to Vice-Marshal of the KPA in the mid-1980s; the rank of Marshal of the KPA, junior to the Marshal of the DPRK was introduced in the mid-1990s; and finally, the rank of Corporal was split in three—Lance Corporal (*ch'ogŭp pyŏngsa*), Corporal (*chunggŭp pyŏngsa*) and Senior Corporal (*sanggŭp pyŏngsa*) in 1998.<sup>27</sup>

### POLITICAL OFFICERS

The institution of political officers is unique to the communist bloc. They are representatives of the Party in the army and their job is to supervise the commanding officer of their unit. The origins of this institution can be traced back to the 1917 February Revolution in Russia. The Provisional Government, formed after the Romanov dynasty was overthrown, was concerned with the loyalty of Russian officers serving on the fronts of World War I, and thus established an institution of political officers called commissioners (also known under a Russified name *commissar*), whose job was to oversee the officers.<sup>28</sup>

This practice was later adopted by the Bolsheviks, who placed political officers in the Red Army during the Civil War of 1918–1923 and later.<sup>29</sup> The role of these officers, however, varied following general changes in Soviet society. At some stages of Soviet history, political officers, in the same way as their predecessors, were supposed to oversee the commander, but at other times they served only as his deputy on political affairs, and were largely responsible for ideological indoctrination. The latter system was made permanent on October 9, 1942, as stipulated in the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet “On the establishing of the unconditional unity of command and of the abolition of the system of commissioners in the Red Army.”<sup>30</sup>

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konghwaguk taewŏnsu ch'ingho rŭl suyŏham e taehan kyŏljŏng” [On bestowing of the rank of Generalissimo of the DPRK on respected comrade Kim Il-sung, the Great Leader of our Party and our people], *Rodong sinmun*, April 14, 1992, 1.

<sup>27</sup> “Kunsa ch'ingho” (Military ranks), in *Pukhan chisik sajŏn* [Dictionary of information regarding North Korea], accessed May 24, 2016, <https://www.uniedu.go.kr/uniedu/home/brd/bbsatcl/nknow/view.do?id=25024&mid=SM00000174&limit=10&page=2>.

<sup>28</sup> Tat'jana Kirillova, *Istorija otechestvennogo gosudarstva i prava* [History of the Russian state and law] (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'skij dom “Piter,” 2008), 99.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>30</sup> “Ob ustanovlenii polnogo edinonachalija i uprazhdenii instituta voennyh komissarov v Krasnoj Armii” [On the establishing of the complete unity of command and the abolition of the

In North Korea, the responsibilities of a political officer are similar to those in the USSR. First, he/she is a secretary of the Party organization in his/her unit and thus oversees the Party affairs. Second, a political officer is responsible for the political and ideological education of the unit's soldiers. The third task—overseeing one's commander—was never an issue in North Korea, as the unity of command (*yuil kwallije*) was established in the KPA from the very beginning, although the officers, all of whom were selected under the new social system, were supposed to be loyal to the Party in general.<sup>31</sup>

It is interesting that North Korea took the titles of the political officers from the older 1942 Soviet system, rather than from the contemporary one.<sup>32</sup> As in the case of the initial lack of military ranks, this may be explained by the USSR's policy towards “people's democracies”: these countries were expected to follow in the footsteps of the Soviets and emulate the Soviet evolution, rather than become a “little USSR” immediately.

North Korea		USSR (1942)		USSR (1945)	
(None)		Front	(None)	Front	Member of the military council <i>Chlen voennogo soveta</i>
		Army	Commissioner <i>Komissar</i>	Army	
Corps	Corps	Corps		Deputy on political affairs <i>Zampolit</i>	
Division	Division	Division			
Brigade	Brigade	Brigade			
Regiment	Regiment	Regiment			
Battalion	Battalion	Battalion			
Company	Political guide <i>Chöngch'i chidowön</i>	Company	Political guide <i>Politrük</i>	Company	
Platoon	(None)	Platoon	(None)	Platoon	
Squad		Squad		Squad	

institution of military commissioners in the Red Army], Prezidium Verhovnogo Soveta SSSR [Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR], October 8, 1942.

<sup>31</sup> Paek Hak-sun. “Pukhan chöngch'i esö üi kundae: Sönggyök, wisang, yökhal” [Army in North Korean politics: Its nature, image, and role]. *Sejong chöngch'ae kyöng'u* 4 (2011): 13–17.

<sup>32</sup> “Voinskie zvanija politstava RKKK v 1935–43 godah i ih znaki razlichija” [Ranks of political officers in the Red Army and their insignia, 1935–1943], accessed May 24, 2016, <http://www.opocuu.com/politstavr-kka.htm>.

## PARTY ORGANISATIONS IN THE MILITARY

Communist countries were led by a Leninist Party. Since it is de facto and sometimes even de jure the only party in the country, it is usually referred to simply as “the Party”. The Party is not a normal political party, but rather a huge bureaucratic structure, which strives to oversee the country’s economy and society in its entirety. Adult citizens can join the Party, although membership is by no means guaranteed, while almost all teenagers are members of some kind of youth league. In the case of the USSR, the Party was the Communist Party of the Soviet Union<sup>33</sup> and the youth league, the “All-Union Leninist Young Communist League,” better known under its Russian abbreviation Komsomol. In North Korea, the Party is called the Workers’ Party of Korea and the youth league, “Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth League.”<sup>34</sup>

Both the Party and the youth league set up their organisations in the army. In the case of North Korea, the youth league military organisations were first created on October 21, 1946,<sup>35</sup> i.e. even before the KPA was formally created, and the Party ones on July 21, 1951,<sup>36</sup> i.e. during the Korean War. In other words, for almost five years, only youth league organisations in North Korea existed in the Army. This can be explained by the fact that in the late 1940s the Soviets wanted to maintain the illusion of North Korea being a multi-party state. Officially, the Worker’s Party was just one of the political parties in the country. Such an image would look much less plausible if the organisation had been placed under the control of the military. Thus, until 1951 the existence of any political party’s organisation in the military was forbidden.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This name was adopted in 1952. When North Korea was created, it was called “All-Union Communist Party” (bolsheviks).

<sup>34</sup> “Kim Il-sŏng sahoejuŭi ch’ŏngnyŏn tongmaeng” [The youth league under Kim Il-sung’s socialism], *Pukhan chisik sajŏn* [Dictionary of information regarding North Korea], accessed May 24, 2016, <http://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/term/viewNkKnwldgDicary.do?pageIndex=5&koreanChrctr=&dicaryId=39>.

<sup>35</sup> “Kundaenaen minch’ŏng chojik e kwanhayŏ” [Regarding Democratic Youth organisations in the military], in *Pukhan kwan’gye saryo chip* (Historical materials on North Korea), vol. 30, (Kwach’ŏn: Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, 1998), 38.

<sup>36</sup> “Inmin kundaenaen tang chŏngch’i saŏp chinhaeng chŏnggyŏng kwa kŭ kanghwa rŭl wihan kŭmhu chedaech’aek e taehayŏ” [On patterns of the Party’s political work in the People’s Army and on future measures for its strengthening], in *Pukhan kwan’gye saryo chip* (Historical materials on North Korea), vol. 29, (Kwach’ŏn: Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, 1998), 183.

<sup>37</sup> “Kundaenaen tang chojik e kwanhayŏ” [Regarding military organisations in the army], in *Pukhan kwan’gye saryo chip* (Historical materials on North Korea), vol. 30, (Kwach’ŏn: Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, 1998), 37.



Since 1951, the situation changed dramatically, as each unit from platoon and above now contains a Party organisation. A platoon had a Party sub-cell (*punsep'otang wiwönboe*), a company, a Party cell (*sep'otang wiwönboe*), a battalion, a primary Party committee (*ch'ogŭp tang wiwönboe*) and a regiment and above, a Party committee (*tang wiwönboe*).<sup>38</sup> Each Party member must be a member of his/her organisation as well, and it should be noted that almost every single officer in the modern KPA is a member of the Party. This system actually provides a deeper penetration of the army than in the USSR or China, as both the Soviet Union and the PRC had Party committees only from battalion level and above, i.e. primary Party committees were, indeed, primary.<sup>39</sup>

Those who do not have membership in the Party are members of the youth league organisations. It is the duty of every organisation to conduct so-called “organisational life” sessions (*chojik saenghwal*). Similar to its civilian counterpart, “organisational life” sessions mostly consist of ideological education, i.e. learning stories about the Kim family’s unsurpassed genius and the superiority of the North Korean political system, as well as criticism and self-criticism sessions. Major “organisational life” sessions are conducted once a week on Saturdays.<sup>40</sup>

The person who oversees these meetings is called “the organisational secretary” (*chojik pisa*). In youth league organisations, this person is either the unit’s commander or its foreman (*sagwanjang*) or forewoman. In the Party, it is always the political officer, and it is he/she, who usually decides who would be allowed to join the Party as well.<sup>41</sup>

Party membership in North Korea is an extremely important qualification, perhaps, even more so, than it was in the Soviet Union. Basically, it is a qualification, without which one cannot enter the country’s social elite. Thus, people strive to join the Party, and the military provides the most reliable way to do so: a military man is much more likely to enter the Party than a civilian, and before the introduction of female conscription in 2015, many women joined the military as volunteers to have an opportunity to eventually join the Party.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Kim Tong-yöp. “Sön’gun sidae Pukhan ūi kunsu chido-chihwi ch’egye: Tang, kukka, kun kwan’gye chungsim ūro” [North Korean command structure in the Son’gun age: Focusing on relations between the Party, the state and the military], Ph.D. diss., Pukhan taehagwön taehakkyo, 2013, 176–183.

<sup>39</sup> Li Xiaobing. *Modern China* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 87;

“Instruktsiya organizatsiyam TsK KPSS v Sovetskoy Armii i Voennno-Morskoy Flote” [The instruction of the CC CPSU to the [Party] organisations in the Soviet Army and Navy], accessed May 24, 2016, <http://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/1004971>.

<sup>40</sup> This information comes from an interview with a North Korean refugee.

<sup>41</sup> This information comes from an interview with a North Korean refugee.

<sup>42</sup> See “Kun pongmu kigan kwa pyöngyöng saenghwal ün?” (What are the term of service and

The procedure of joining the Workers' Party was basically copied from the USSR as well. A candidate has to submit two recommendations from Party members, but the final decision is made by the political officer. The latter is supposed to take into consideration a person's lineage, character, knowledge of North Korean ideology and basic documents like "the covenant of the Workers' Party of Korea"<sup>43</sup> Once the political officer approves a candidate, the latter is given the status of a "candidate member" and in one year he/she becomes a full member of the Party. This system was taken from the USSR as well.<sup>44</sup>

### CHINESE INFLUENCE

Some readers may have assumed that China also exerted a significant influence on the North Korean army. The Chinese army entered the Korean War in 1950 and was stationed in North Korea until 1958. Some high-ranking North Korean officers used to live in China and Kim Il-sung himself used to be a member of the Communist Party of China. Given that, one might expect the North Korean army to reflect many Chinese features.

However, this was mostly not the case for the regular army. The formation of the Korean People's Army was completed more than two years before the Chinese intervention, and to adopt some Chinese-style qualities would have meant abolishing previously established Soviet-style traits, which contemporary North Korea was not prepared to do. Instead of abolishing ranks, North Korea introduced them in 1952 and kept this system. China eventually abolished conscription, the DPRK never did. Furthermore, while the authority of the local Party committees in China was undermined during the Cultural Revolution, the role of the Party as the bureaucratic apparatus that governs the country has never been questioned in North Korea, even after the proclamation of the Sŏn'gun policy.

On the other hand, when it came to newly established paramilitary organisations, the Chinese influence would have been impossible to deny. The DPRK's Workers' and Farmers' Red Guard (Ronong chŏkwidae) was almost exactly copied from the People's Liberation Army Militia (Minbing).<sup>45</sup>

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barracks life like?), *T'ongil Han'guk* 10 (2014): 44-45.

<sup>43</sup> Kim Tong-yŏp. "Sŏn'gun sidae Pukhan ūi kunsu chido-chihwi ch'egye: Tang, kukka, kun kwan'gye chungsim ūro", 176-183.

<sup>44</sup> *Ustav Vsesojuznoj Kommunističeskoj partii (bol'shevikov)*. [Covenant of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks], 1934.

<sup>45</sup> The following Soviet document mentions it: Aleksandr Mal'chevskij. "Spravka o sozdanii

As for the regular DPRK forces (i.e. the KPA itself), Chinese influence is rather marginal. The DPRK, like the PRC and unlike the USSR, has an organ named “Central Military Commission” (K. Chungang kunsu wiwŏnhoe, C. Zhongyang junshi weiyuanhui). However, whilst in China this was and is the supreme state organ in command of the army, in North Korea the Central Military Commission shares this role with the Ministry of People’s Armed Forces, Supreme Staff and the National Defence Commission.<sup>46</sup>

Other Chinese influence is mostly limited to symbols. One example may be the North Korean military flag which bears the number “4.25” (“Korean People’s Army Ground Forces <...>”). This date means April 25, 1932, when according to the North Korean distorted version of history, Kim Il-sung created the “Korean People’s Revolutionary Army”, which is credited by DPRK propaganda as the force which defeated the Japanese Empire. The idea of putting the date on the flag comes from China, which has the mark “8.1” on its banners. The mark “8.1” stands for August 1, 1927, the date of the Nanchang Uprising, and the major difference between the two countries is that the Nanchang Uprising was a real historical event.

However, when it comes to structure, ranks, regulations and the organizational peculiarities of the regular North Korean army, these came not from the PRC, but from the USSR.

## CONCLUSION

The Korean People’s Army was originally created under the supervision of high-ranking Soviet officers. Faced with the task of creating a military force for a communist country, they strived to copy the structure of the army they served in. Thus, the legacy of the Imperial Army of Japan was ignored completely as the new army was to follow the Soviet model and only the Soviet model.

The new army mimicked the Soviet original in almost every way. Unit hierarchy, military ranks, Party organisations in the military, and the institution of political officers—everything was done according to the example of the USSR. North Korean army regulations were translated from Russian as well—and, as shown

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krasnoj raboche-krest’yanskoj gvardii v KNDR” (A reference on the creation of the Workers’ and Farmers’ Red Guard in the DPRK), in *P’yŏngyang Soryŏn taesakwan pimil sŏch’ŏl* [Secret files of the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang], 2002, file# KM012104, 2-4. The author would like to thank one of the *Acta Koreana*’s reviewers for pointing out this document to him.

<sup>46</sup> “Kunsa chojik” [Military-related organisations], accessed May 24, 2016,

<http://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/overview/nkOverview.do?sumryMenuId=MR104>.

above, translated rather badly.

The model that served as the original was, however, not always the contemporary one. Sometimes, traditions which had existed in the earlier stage of the USSR's history (1920s and 30s) were adopted as well. Perhaps the most vivid manifestation of this was the absence of military ranks in the North Korean army from 1948 to 1952.

Moreover, some limited autonomy was granted to the North Koreans from the very beginning. In the case of the army, for example, both ranks and political officers' hierarchy were, although very similar, not identical to the Soviet original. All this was in full accordance with the Soviet authorities' strategy. As expressed in Colonel General Shtykov's speech to his subordinates: "Enforce the Soviet social system, with respect to the local peculiarities."<sup>47</sup> And they did just that.

One should not, however, assume that the creation of the army in the image of the Soviet Union was the opposite of what the DPRK's Korean elite wanted. First, in the 1940s, the USSR was usually perceived by Asian Communists as the ideal state and for them imitating its ways would be similar to striving for perfection.<sup>48</sup> Second, the very decision of who would constitute such an elite was made by the Soviets, who, of course, strived to appoint only loyal Koreans to positions of power.

It should be noted that the findings of this article can be of relevance to historiographical debates going on in Korean studies. While many authors acknowledge the Soviet origins of the DPRK's socio-political system, there are some who describe the North Korean state as having been formed by Kim Il-sung's partisans, stressing the national and nationalist origins of the DPRK state.<sup>49</sup> The results of this research, however, cast doubt on these approaches. If the state was run by members of partisan units according to their guerrilla experience, this would probably have been manifested in the armed forces above all other things, and yet we see almost nothing of the sort. If North Korea was a "guerrilla state," why would the former partisans, who were allegedly in charge, create an army mimicking a Soviet one, instead of using their own experience?

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<sup>47</sup> Andrei Smirnov. "Podkidysh Kim Ir Sen: Kak Sovetskaya Armiya vendrila v Severnuyu Koreyu presidenta Kim Ir Sena i ego pravitel'stvo" [Kim Il-sung the foundling: how the Soviet Army implanted President Kim Il-sung and his government into North Korea], *Sorevshenno sekretno*, vol. 8, 1992.

<sup>48</sup> This explains why the People's Liberation Army of China was modeled according to the standards of the Soviet Union too, despite China being politically much more independent from Moscow than the early DPRK. See Xiaobing Li, *A History of the Modern Chinese Army* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 122–127.

<sup>49</sup> For such claims, see Jae-Jung Suh, *Origins of North Korea's Juche: Colonialism, War, and Development* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 72.

Therefore, this article's findings should be viewed as a strong argument in favour of a traditional interpretation of early North Korean history, which views the late 1940s–early 1950s DPRK as a puppet state of the Soviet Union.

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