

## Book Review

**Fyodor Tertitskiy.** *Accidental Tyrant: The Life of Kim Il-Sung*. Hurst, London, 2025. pp. 352, Hb. £25.00. ISBN 9781911723547

North Korea's founder Kim Il-sung was a survivor, but was it through serendipity or aspiration? In this biography, Tertitskiy puts his thumb heavily on the serendipity side of scale, crafting his story accordingly. But the reality is that all lives are serial accidents and Kim Il-sung's no more than most. Kim had the right biography, educated – for a Korean of his era – and brought up a Christian with exposure to Western ideas. The most brutal phase of a harsh Japanese colonial occupation of the Korean Peninsula dragooned the family into fleeing to Manchuria, where the ideas of a radicalised Kim evolved quickly from moral to physical opposition to Tokyo. He joined a guerrilla band harrying Japan's troops and then the Chinese Communist Party. The latter provided a steeper learning curve than the former. The result was that Kim's war ended along with the remnants of the region's resistance. By the autumn of 1940 his unit had been pushed over the border into the Soviet Union, months before Moscow signed its Neutrality Pact with Tokyo. Kim's official Korean biography has a more hagiographic reading of this period but is a recognisable – if laundered, embellished and dramatised – reading of Tertitskiy's.

Kim spent the next few years parked in Stalin's Foreign Legion near Khabarovsk, where he rose up the ranks as much because of his command of Russian than of his men. After the Soviet Union joined the war against Japan, and Washington dissected the peninsula, Kim and his comrades were belatedly shipped home, this time to Soviet occupation. Soviet military intelligence went looking for a puppet-leader but couldn't find a suitable candidate. Lavrentiy Beria, head of the NKVD, trumped them with Kim. Kim rapidly became the first among equals as his faction co-existed alongside Pak Hon-yong's Southern Communists, the Soviet-Koreans and the Chinese-Koreans.

Division along the famed 38th Parallel allowed political osmosis: the Left leached to the North and the rich fled South, with Syngman Rhee bloodily suppressing attempts at southern insurrection in the years before Stalin and Mao signed-off on Kim's civil war. It was too late; the 'fifth column' in the South had long been consigned to camps or mass graves. The civil war turned into a Sino-US proxy war as Mao chose to fight what he saw as

an inevitable conflict with America on away turf rather than at home. The result was a draw with both sides claiming victory. Kim took the opportunity of purging Pak and his faction for their revolutionary optimism. Kim followed, rather successfully, the Stalinist road to industrialisation with coal, steel and concrete in the vanguard, sugared with land reform for the countryside, all under the shadow of a burgeoning cult of personality.

Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' in 1956 denouncing Stalin led to suicidal moves by Pyongyang's internal opposition. They attempted to sideline Kim and forlornly failed. Those that were able fled to China or the Soviet Union. Those who were unable were dead men talking. Kim and his 'partisan generals' were the victors. At this point, *Accidental Tyrant* dives into an exegesis of Kim's ideas of *juche* (self-reliance) that seemingly bedevils Kremlinologists of the North. For me it's a self-discovered variant of Lukacsian Marxism where the will of people and leader can overcome all; explaining how a small benighted country on the edge of history can lead the world. Nietzsche will never be dead while *juche* lives.

In the late 1960s, Stalinist development was stuttering and stalling as Kim failed to make the transition from heavy to light industry and Seoul's economy threatened to overtake that of Pyongyang. Kim looked for lessons in Vietnam's struggle and learnt them badly: neither fresh insurrections nor underground opposition would win a second Korean war. Kim, as Tertitskiy details, continues to play-off Moscow against Beijing to the North's benefit. Neither re-assures Kim of the safety of his legacy. In 1971, the highly pejorative definition of hereditary succession vanishes from the North's lexicons. Kim Jong Il is made 'crown-prince' and the country's precocious *éminence grise*.

By the 1980s, the North is increasingly on life-support as Seoul stretches its lead, threatening to disappear over the economic horizon. The endgame is disastrous. The collapse of the Soviet empire is the trigger. Moscow abandons the North and Beijing demands hard cash. Industrialised agriculture, now bereft of fertiliser, electricity and spare parts, sees a collapse in production with hunger stalking the land and hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of premature deaths. Grandparents starve themselves for their grandchildren. Kim's last decisions haunt the present. Firstly, a desperate attempt to normalise relations with Washington was ignored until it met with its first willing president in the form of Donald Trump (but even he proved unable, as the Hanoi Summit demonstrated). Second, Kim decided that no-one was to be trusted. Pyongyang's

security was to be under an indigenous nuclear umbrella. Today this threatens the end of the Non-Proliferation Treaty as the next likely dominos to go nuclear are Seoul, Tokyo and Taipei.

*Accidental Tyrant* provides a clear vision of the man who made North Korea the country it is today. Tertitskiy, a lecturer at Korea University in Seoul, has drawn on previously unavailable Soviet sources to help us to disinter and separate myth and reality. As a biography, it leapfrogs over Suh Dae-sook's *Kim Il Sung; the North Korean leader* (1988) and it will take some bettering.

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