

# North Korea and the Theory of the Deformed Workers' State: Definitions and First Principles of a Fourth International Theory

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## Abstract

This essay examines the academically neglected theory of the *deformed workers' state* in relation to the political character of the North Korean state. Developed by leaders of the Fourth International, the world party of socialism founded by exiled Russian Bolshevik revolutionary Leon Trotsky, the theory classifies the national states that arose under post-Second World War Soviet Army occupation as bureaucratic, hybrid, transitional formations that imitated the Soviet Stalinist system. The author reviews the origin of the theory, explores its political propositions and apparent correspondences in the North Korean case, and concludes with some hypotheses and suggestions for further research.

## Introduction

On the centenary of the birth of Kim Il Sung in 2012, North Korea entered a period officially designated as “opening the gate to a great prosperous and powerful socialist nation.” Coming after the post-Soviet rise of markets within a planned economy, the initiation of capitalist Special Economic Zones in the early 1990s and 2000s, market-oriented economic and currency reforms in 2002, and the dropping of “communism” from the 2009 revised constitution, the reference to present-day North Korea as a “socialist nation” is evidently more symbolic than substantial. Still, over sixty years after the founding of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) on 9 September 1948, the political character of the North Korean state remains a more or less unresolved issue in North Korean studies. Emphasizing different empirical, ideological, and political characteristics of the state, scholars past and present have classified North Korea as Communist, Stalinist, Confucian-Stalinist, Marxist-Leninist, monarchist, nationalist, socialist, socialist corporatist, state socialist, theocratic, and totalitarian. Others have also categorized the state as post-Stalinist and post-totalitarian (Lankov 2006; McEachern 2009). Yet neglected in the academic discussion is the theory of the *deformed workers’ state*. Officially inaugurated in 1951 by the Fourth International – the party of world socialist revolution founded by exiled Russian Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky in 1938 against Stalinism – the theory maintains that the states that issued under Soviet Army occupation after the Second World were not workers’ states, but bureaucratic, hybrid, transitional formations that arose under peculiar and exceptional historical conditions.

The theory of the *deformed workers’ state* is not mentioned in political scientists Robert A. Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee’s two-volume classic *Communism in Korea*, published in 1972, nor is it readily encountered in the North Korean studies scholarship that has been produced in the four decades after Scalapino and Lee. While reference has been made to the “grotesquely deformed” or “grossly deformed” economic structure of North Korea (Lee 2001:23, 44), the said theory appears to be generally underrepresented and largely unknown in professional North Korean studies. As far as the author is aware, it has not been elaborated in the field as a designation for the DPRK. This situation is no doubt a consequence of the historically marginalized and persecuted character of the international socialist movement from which the *deformed workers’ state* theory originates.

Unlike the national Communist parties around the world, which were de facto foreign agencies of the Kremlin, the Trotskyist movement did not have the political and financial patronage of a powerful state apparatus. Since Josef Stalin's seizure of Soviet power in 1924 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the word "Trotskyism" was employed as an all-purpose term of political slander and demonization, used against the orthodox Marxist opposition to the Soviet bureaucracy and even against the independent national-Stalinist regimes of Josip Tito in Yugoslavia and Mao Zedong in China, both having split with the Soviet Union. Sixty-seven years of Soviet Stalinism and the Stalinist version of Marxism known as "Marxism-Leninism" do not, however, automatically invalidate whatever insight the *deformed workers' state* theory may bring in appraising the political character of North Korea.

### **Soviet Expansionism and the Deformed Workers' State**

Subsequent to the Second World War, the nationalist Stalinist Soviet state could no longer maintain itself and the existence of its privileged bureaucratic caste exclusively on the basis of the Russian home market in a self-contained and self-reliant socialist society, contrary to what Stalin had propounded in 1924 and 1925 (Stalin 1954a:110-1; Stalin 1954b:306). The problems of national autarky were exacerbated with the emergence of the Cold War in Europe and the increasing U.S. military threat against the Soviet Union. In order to rehabilitate the postwar Soviet economy within the Stalinist programmatic orientation of *socialism in one country*, a policy of Soviet expansionism and structural assimilation was instituted (Germain 2005a), taking advantage of the political agreements made at Tehran (1943), Yalta (1945), and Potsdam (1945) to divide Europe into American and Soviet zones of influence. Administration of Korea under an international trusteeship was discussed at Tehran and Yalta, and the basis for partitioning the peninsula was laid at Potsdam, that having been preceded by an ambiguous position on Korean independence at the Cairo Conference in 1943. By 1945, U.S. military planners and President Harry S. Truman dictated the final terms for the division of Korea along the 38th parallel, a unilateral decision that Stalin accepted and which was written into General Order Number One drafted by the U.S. War Department.

Utilization of the Eastern European zone as a military buffer against U.S. imperialism, along with exploitation of resources for the economic reconstruction of the USSR, led to the integration and assimilation of Eastern Europe into the Soviet system. Subordinated to Soviet economy, foreign policy, and national interests, the buffer states were reconstituted – under Soviet military occupation – in the form of “people’s democracies” or “new democracies,” coalition regimes that did not usher from proletarian revolutions and which were supposed to be an another road to socialism. Notably, as Stalin’s foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov had declared when the Soviet Army entered Romania in 1944, the Soviet government did not intend to transform the capitalist social systems of Eastern Europe. Rather, as Pierre Frank of the Fourth International observed in 1951, the original purpose was “to replace the hostile governments of the past (the *cordon sanitaire* at the end of the First World War) by governments friendly to the USSR” (Frank 2005). That was essentially the same aim Stalin pursued in northern Korea (Armstrong 2003:54). The intensifying relationship of world political forces, however, determined respective policy changes in the buffer zone, engendering a more defensive orientation in Europe. Soviet interests were threatened by the decision of the U.S. government to rule out further deals with Moscow after the 1947 Marshall Plan, the situation being upset further by the events in Yugoslavia when Tito split with the Soviet Union in 1948. This was followed by the Cominform Resolution of June 1948 and the initiation of the “left” turn for the “people’s democracies.” Vassalized to the strategic and tactical perspectives of Soviet Stalinism, the occupied states in the buffer zone imitated Soviet forms in economics, politics, and ideology; underwent a process of Russification; and, with the exception of Yugoslavia and later China, were directly manipulated by the Kremlin. North Korea, which was liberated from Imperial Japan by the Soviet Army on 15 August 1945 and founded under Soviet occupation as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea on 9 September 1948, more or less mirrored the Eastern European line of development, but would subsequently extricate itself from Soviet satellite status as a consequence of the catastrophic Korean War (1950–1953) and the Sino-Soviet split (1961–1963), a fact confirmed in North Korean studies scholarship.

When Stalin reformulated the mid-1940s “people’s democracy” slogan in 1948 – he claimed it is was not a *dictatorship of the proletariat* (a workers’ state) and

characteristically revised his position (Pablo 2005b) – the FI was developing an original Marxist-Trotskyist theory to account for the Eastern European “buffer states” that issued without proletarian revolutions and under the auspices of the Stalinized Soviet Army after the Second World War. (North Korea falls under this category.) As an alternative conceptual structure to the “people’s democracy,” the theory of the *deformed workers’ state* was inaugurated at the Third World Congress of the FI in April 1951. Definition of the postwar states as bureaucratically deformed hybrid entities was not arrived at through a process of spontaneous generation, but was preceded by a long period of political observation, examination, and inner-party discussion on the world political developments of the 1940s, the events unfolding in Yugoslavia from 1942 to 1948, and the resolutions promulgated at the Second World Congress of the FI in April 1948.

Writing under the alias E. Germain in “The Question of Stalinism” (April 1951), Ernest Mandel, a twenty-eight-year-old political leader in the FI, reexamined the hypothetical and tentative analyses of Stalin’s buffer zone, as formerly presented at the Second World Congress, and summarized political developments in Eastern Europe:

[T]he bourgeoisie very quickly lost political power – the dates differing from one country to another – with the power passing over to the Communist parties, supporting themselves on the military and police forces of the bureaucracy. And they have ruled for an entire period without radically transforming the structure of private property and the state apparatus. The changes which have recently taken place in numerous countries in the state apparatuses mark a new stage in the transformation of these workers and peasants governments into deformed workers’ states. At the same time, this transformation is accompanied by an ever stricter and more direct control of the *Soviet* bureaucracy over the entire social life of these countries. The culmination of this process is the *effective* integration of their economy into Soviet planning, of their armies into the Soviet army, which will terminate the process of structural assimilation. So long as this process is not concluded, the situation of each country in the buffer zone remains unstable and transitory and subject to the oscillations of the international relationship of forces. (Germain 2005a; italics in original)

With the advantage of historical hindsight, it is clear that Mandel's phrase "workers and peasants governments" was an oversimplification, and it should not be taken literally, since the regimes in the buffer zone transited from their inception as "united front" coalition regimes – which accommodated Stalinists, national bourgeoisies, and rich peasants – to more radical state forms that began to expropriate their propertied social layers without empowering the laboring classes. Here, in any case, may be found an official articulation of the *deformed workers' state* theory in the period of its formal inauguration at the Third World Congress in April 1951. The adopted FI resolution titled "Class Nature of Eastern Europe" defines the theory as follows:

The form of political power still remains marked by important differences from one country to another and in their entirety with that of the USSR, as is likewise the case so far as the form of political power in the capitalist system is concerned, but it is above all by virtue of their economic base, of the structure essentially common to all the countries of the buffer zone, characterized by new production and *property relations proper to a statified and planned economy, essentially like those of the USSR*, that as of now are *deformed workers' states*. These states have arisen not through the revolutionary action of the masses but through the military-bureaucratic action of the Soviet bureaucracy. Thanks to the exceptional circumstances created by the last war [i.e., Second World War] they are not administered directly by the proletariat but by a bureaucracy. The bureaucratic deformation of these states is of the same magnitude as that characterizing the USSR, the proletariat being totally deprived of power. (Class Nature of Eastern Europe 2005; italics in original)

This passage is notable in that the new state forms are defined first in terms of their "economic base" (i.e., production-property relations proper to a statified-planned economy like the Soviet system). The resolution, however, does not provide quantitative economic data. Subsequent to the qualitative economic criteria, the document emphasizes politics, stating that the buffer states are neither the product of the independent revolutionary self-action of the working class, nor are these state apparatuses managed by the workers themselves. One should note that the Third Congress did not apply the

*deformed workers' state* characterization to Yugoslavia, since the state was not formed under the Soviet Army and assimilated into the Soviet Union. Instead, the FI said a “victorious proletarian revolution” had occurred and that Yugoslavia was a “workers’ state” with “bureaucratic deformations” (The Yugoslav Revolution 2009).<sup>1</sup> Regarding China, the FI position in 1951 was far more tentative. The Chinese Trotskyist Peng Shuzi drew attention to this problem in his report at the Third Congress, responding to what he termed “opinions [. . .] that tend to deviate from the Marxist line.” One such opinion was that of Mandel, who held that the Stalinist- and peasant-based Chinese Communist Party (CCP) became a workers’ party in 1949 because it seized power and entered the cities. Analyzing the class nature of the CCP regime, Peng said it came to power through a “deformed revolutionary movement” and “deformed revolution,” that it was “charged with incompatible [class] contradictions and high explosives,” and that it would be “very short-lived and transitional,” obliged in the end to choose between the proletariat or bourgeoisie. The regime, however, was “moving in the direction of a deformed dictatorship of the proletariat” (Peng 1952). Peng, in other words, was saying China under the Stalinist party was becoming a *deformed workers' state* of a new kind, one not formed under the Soviet Army or structurally assimilated into the Soviet economic system.

Anticipating potential confusion over terminology, the FI resolution on the class nature of the buffer states attempted to clarify the adjective “deformed” as used in the name of its theory:

We do not mean “deformed” in the sense of workers’ states marred by bureaucratic deformations as was the case with the USSR, in the first years of its existence. In this context the word deformed means that these states have primarily the same fundamental defect of the USSR, i.e., *the complete*

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<sup>1</sup> These terms sound remarkably similar to Vladimir Lenin’s and Leon Trotsky’s characterizations of the post-revolutionary Soviet Union. Lenin’s description is found in his 19 January 1921 speech “The Party Crisis,” in which he says the Soviet Union is “a workers’ state with bureaucratic distortions” (Lenin 2002). Other translations render the latter phrase as “bureaucratic deformations.” As for Trotsky, he referred to the Stalin-era Soviet Union as a bureaucratic “deformed workers’ state, a degenerated workers’ state” with “a proletarian economy, a deformed Socialist economy” in his famous testimony before the Dewey Commission in 1937 (Trotsky 2007a). Trotsky, however, more often referred to the Stalinist Soviet Union as a degenerated workers’ state.

*elimination of the proletariat, on the economic as well as the political plane, from the leadership of these countries.* (Class Nature of Eastern Europe 2005; emphasis added)

The *deformed workers' state* was not a workers' state, for it was without economic and political rule by the working class. Suggested in this definition, as well as in Peng's analysis of CCP-ruled China, is the anticipation that such states would eventually experience the same fate Trotsky prognosticated of the Stalinist Soviet Union in 1936: "The longer the Soviet Union remains in a capitalist environment, the deeper runs the *degeneration of the social fabric*. A prolonged isolation would inevitably end not in national communism, but in a *restoration of capitalism*," a position analytically and economically substantiated in *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936) (Trotsky 2007b; emphasis added). But within two years of the Third Congress, the International Secretariat of the FI, under the leadership of Michel Pablo, abandoned Trotsky's perspective, proposing the objectivist theories of "centuries" of *deformed workers' states*, atomic "war-revolution" between the United States and Soviet Union, and the entryist line of liquidating the Trotskyist movement into the Stalinist parties. The result was the 1953 split in the FI between the orthodox Trotskyists in the International Committee led by James P. Cannon of the Socialist Workers Party (U.S.) and the adaptationists in the International Secretariat led by Pablo. Cannon, it should be noted, does not appear to have used the term "deformed workers' state" in his political writings, associating it with "Pablo's revisionism" and defining it as "Stalin-type workers' states" (Cannon 2008).

Here, mention should be briefly made of the British ex-Trotskyist Tony Cliff, founder of the Socialist Review Group, now the Socialist Workers' Party in Britain, who developed a competing theory of "state capitalism" in 1947 and broke with the FI in 1950. That was the year the FI began calling Yugoslavia a "workers state."<sup>2</sup> Dissatisfied with the changing political appraisals of the FI on the class character of the buffer states

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<sup>2</sup> One source says the executive committee of the Fourth International officially designated Yugoslavia a "deformed workers' state" in April 1950 (North 1988:180). The author does not have access to the relevant documents, and the *Marxists Internet Archive* collection "Toward a History of the Fourth International" does not presently hold documents from 1950. Other historical materials, however, indicate that, in 1950, the Fourth International was referring to Yugoslavia as a "workers' state." See the appendix to Tony Cliff's *On the Class Nature of the "People's Democracies"* (1950) and Ted Grant's "Open Letter to B.S.F.I." (1950). Both Cliff and Grant broke with the Fourth International.



between 1946 to 1950, Cliff wrote a polemic against the world Trotskyist party titled *On the Class Nature of the "People's Democracies"* (1950), charging that the leaders of the FI, such as Mandel and Pablo, had capitulated to the Stalinist Tito regime and descended into theoretical bankruptcy and political dishonesty. Were the buffer states capitalist states or workers' states? That was the central question. Cliff's 1947 theory held that the Soviet Union and the buffer states, which included North Korea, were fundamentally capitalist states. While acknowledging that there was a Stalinist leadership, state ownership, and state planning in the "people's democracies," he maintained that the economy was capitalist and that these states were capitalist countries operating under the laws of capitalist exploitation. Cliff added that the buffers were "satellites and colonies" of the Soviet "mother" country and that this relationship was based on traditional capitalist relations of production. For Cliff, the Soviet bureaucracy was the owner of all capital; it capitalistically exploited the proletariat in Stalin's empire; and it continued the capitalist internal policy into the domain of foreign policy (Cliff 2002). During the Korean War and apropos of his "state capitalist" theory, Cliff saw the conflict not as a civil war, but as a struggle between "American imperialism" and "Russian imperialism" to divide the planet. The explosion in Korea was, for Cliff, basically a contest between two puppet governments, and he declared a "neither Washington nor Moscow" position in November 1950 (Tennant 2006). Cannon, on the other hand, in July 1950, analyzed the Korean War as part of the colonial revolution in Asia against Western imperialism and opposed U.S. military intervention, which he termed an "imperialist invasion." Cannon's position did not translate as FI support for the Stalinists in Moscow and Pyongyang, but support for the right of the Korean people themselves to settle their own affairs and reunify their country on their own terms (North 1988:50-3).

David North, national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party, U.S. section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), explains in the historiographic polemic *The Heritage We Defend* (1988) that despite the opportunism of "Pabloism" (i.e., pseudo-Trotskyism), the theory of the *deformed workers' state* was not a wrong characterization of the postwar Eastern European buffer states and the Yugoslav state. (North Korea can also be included in the argument.) Rather, Pablo and his faction in the FI exploited the ambiguities in the definition of the *deformed workers' state*. The

theory is acceptable and necessary as long as it is used within a range of historical and political tolerance, which North terms “dialectical tolerance.” That is to say, the theory and its classifications are not absolute. For example, capitalist China today can no longer be defined as a bureaucratic *deformed workers’ state* (International Committee of the Fourth International 1998), the open transition to capitalism having begun when Deng Xiaoping initiated market-oriented reforms in 1978, resulting in China becoming a massive cheap labor platform for multinational and transnational corporations.<sup>3</sup> Besides the matter of “dialectical tolerance,” the FI theory does not provide a political prototype for future states. North explains the thesis of the *deformed workers’ state* in the following terms:

[A]s a means of defining the “hybrid” states which came into being under the specific and peculiar conditions of the postwar period and of emphasizing the distorted and abnormal character of their origins, the concept of a *deformed workers’ state* establishes the principled basis upon which the Trotskyist movement asserts the necessity of defending these states against imperialist intervention, while at the same time clearly indicating the political tasks that confront the working class within these countries [i.e., overthrow of the bureaucracy in a political revolution – AD].

The use of the term *deformed* places central attention upon the crucial historical difference between the overthrow of the [Russian] capitalist state in October 1917 and the overturns which occurred [under the Stalinized Soviet Army] in the late 1940s in Eastern Europe – that is, the absence of mass organs of proletarian power, Soviets, led by a Bolshevik-type party. Moreover, the term itself implies the merely transitory existence of state regimes of dubious historical viability, whose actions in every sphere – political and economic – bear the stamp of the distorted and abnormal character of their birth.

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<sup>3</sup> China is now the second largest economy in the world, having made relative gains in real income and living standards for sections of the population and seeing a significant fall in absolute poverty since the 1970s. Uneven development and privatization, however, have resulted in the growth of high levels of social and income inequality; increasing costs of living; personal debt, unemployment, and homelessness problems; a widening urban-rural divide; 14.87 million poverty-stricken people in rural areas (Chen 2010); exploitation of cheap migrant labor; and an underfunded public health system.

Thus, far from associating such regimes with new historical vistas, the designation *deformed* underscores the historical bankruptcy of Stalinism and points imperiously to the necessity for the building of a genuine Marxist leadership, the mobilization of the working class against the ruling bureaucracy in a political revolution, the creation of genuine organs of workers' power, and the destruction of the countless surviving vestiges of the old capitalist relations within the state structure and economy.

However, the *ambiguity of the new definition* provided an opening which opportunists were quick to exploit. Within the Fourth International, the use of the term “deformed” was being treated as if it were no more than a sort of adjectival afterthought. Rather than being seen as a historical mutation, produced under peculiar and exceptional conditions which were bound up with the unresolved crisis of proletarian revolutionary leadership, the theory of the deformed workers' states was being transformed [from 1951] into the starting point for an entirely revisionist perspective. (North 1988:178-9; emphasis added)

While this quote, in contrast to the 1951 resolution, focuses exclusively on politics, and points to definitional ambiguity in the *deformed workers' state* theory, the explanation denotes key requisite characteristics of the postwar state forms – without investing these states with unjustified positive connotations – and exhibits logical continuities between Trotsky's theory of the *degenerated workers' state* and the FI theory of the *deformed workers' state*, as well as points of separation between the two types of state. The latter divergences are to be found in the historical-political origins of the workers' state that issued from the October 1917 Russian Revolution and the non-proletarian states that resulted from the 1940s Soviet Stalinist liberation-occupation and “independent” Stalinist “revolutions.” Nevertheless, the somewhat makeshift name “deformed workers' state” continued to be a source of considerable theoretical and political confusion, creating the impression that the hybrid states in Europe and Northeast Asia were still “workers' states,” however deformed, and of an objectively progressive character. The ICFI thus made the argument in 2005 and 2006 that in view of the anti-working class establishment and evolution of the national-Stalinist states, such as Mao's China, the political category of the *deformed workers' state* should be “more accurately defined” as a “deformed

bourgeois state” (North 2005; Chan 2006). This reformulation, which is also not free of a certain ambiguity, has the apparent terminological advantage of underscoring the mutated character of the state, its non-proletarian origin and foundation, and the national-Stalinist acceptance of a historically capitalist socioeconomic formation.

An understanding of the *deformed workers' state* in the aforesaid terms seems to account for salient features and tendencies of the North Korean state before and after its founding in September 1948. On the basis of contemporaneous analysis, the Second World Congress of the FI characterized the buffer states as fundamentally bourgeois “hybrid” formations whose state apparatuses were occupied by Stalinist functionaries and defended private property. The buffer states maintained a “bourgeois function and structure” while simultaneously representing an “extreme form of Bonapartism.” (See section discussion below on Bonapartism and *Juche* ideology.) After further observation of the effects of Soviet expansionism, the provisional characterization was modified at the Seventh Plenum of the International Executive Committee of the FI in April 1949, which explained that nationalization of heavy industry, initiation of economic planning, and sanctions against rich peasants in Eastern Europe signified a turn to “a unique type of hybrid transitional society” that was “on the road to structural assimilation with the USSR” (North 1988:145, 156-9; The USSR and Stalinism 2009; Germain 2005b). That political transition materialized in Soviet Army-occupied northern Korea with incidental divergences to events in the Eastern European countries, that is, until the Korean civil war.

### **National Consciousness and the Postwar Mass Movement**

The mass movement in Korea, which was in process during the period of colonial rule and included rural unrest and peasant radicalism, was galvanized after the defeat of Japanese imperialism and colonialism – a traumatic thirty-five-year experience with its most barbarous anti-Korean phase in the period of Imperial Japanese fascism in 1931 to 1945. The postwar situation in the country gave rise to independently formed People’s Committees (PCs) throughout the peninsula, as well as to the founding of the People’s Republic of Korea (PRK), which was presided over by a coalition government based in Seoul. But the joint U.S.-Soviet liberation, occupation, and division of the Korean

peninsula along the 38th parallel deeply problematized the national-liberation mass movement. The anticommunist U.S. military occupation regime, which supported the ultra-rightwing nationalist leader Syngman Rhee, illegalized the PCs and the PRK. The Soviet Army, on the other hand, intervened in the mass movement, placed the PCs under Stalinist leadership, and controlled the postwar upsurge in Korean national consciousness – all in the interests of Soviet foreign policy. Ernest Mandel explained in 1951 how Stalinism could be accepted in North Korea:

We have seen cases where the approach of the Soviet armies stimulates the revolutionary activity of the masses. The effects of the occupation only later lead to a recession in the movement of the masses. On the other hand, occupation by the Russian army has had completely reactionary effects from the viewpoint of this movement, above all in countries where living standards and culture are higher than in the USSR. *Temporary occupation of countries which are on a lower level (such as Inner Mongolia, North Korea, North Iran, etc.) can produce opposite effects because, in these countries, the bureaucracy does not appear as a rapacious force and the low level of political consciousness [i.e., international class consciousness] amongst the masses permits the establishment of a control over them by methods which appear progressive in their eyes compared with the oppression they have previously experienced.* (Germain 2005a; emphasis added)

International class consciousness, indeed, was not well developed in colonial Korea, where the radicalized intellectuals, masses of peasants, and workers were generally drawn to the ethnic nationalism, patriotism, and populism that formed in reaction to Imperial Japanese colonialism and fascism, notably so in the late 1920s and 1930s during the Depression.<sup>4</sup> Not insignificantly, comparative historical sociologist Gi-Wook Shin has said, “In the North, peasant activism provided a crucial basis for social revolution by way of sweeping land reform [in 1946]” (Shin 1996:174). That, however, was a revolution from above under the supervision of the Soviet Army. Stalinism, a politically conservative, insular, and nationalist movement, exploited radical peasant populism and

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<sup>4</sup> See Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

found fertile ground in a highly bureaucratic and hierarchical postcolonial society with over five hundred years of authoritarian feudal Neo-Confucian rule under the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910). North Korean national-Stalinism also did not declare war against Confucianism, but selectively accepted and adapted its feudal values, such as filial piety, patriarchal authority, and subordination of women (even if North Korean women were formally granted gender equality), in the process of state formation (Kang 2005).

The rate of development of North Korea, if interpreted as a *deformed workers' state*, was historically convergent with Eastern Europe, while also being dictated by the world political situation, national conditions and peculiarities, and the pragmatism and empiricism of the Soviet Stalinist line as it was being worked out at the moment for the respective zones of influence. As the historian Balász Szalontai observes in his study *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, post-liberation regime developments in the North, while having their own Korean touches, “were not fundamentally different from contemporaneous measures taken by this or that Eastern bloc government” under Soviet political, economic, and military auspices (Szalontai 2005:13). Szalontai adds:

North Korea bore a resemblance to East Germany in its postponement of collectivization for the sake of national unification, to Bulgaria in the absence of Soviet troops, to Albania in its dependence on foreign expertise, and so on. North Korean methods were also influenced by the style of CCP [i.e., Chinese Communist Party] policies from the beginning. (Szalontai 2005:13-4)

Szalontai explains further that similar to initiatives in Germany, Hungary, and other Eastern European countries, Soviet military authorities sought to “curb the radicalism of the ‘domestic’ Korean communists in order not to exacerbate political tension” (Szalontai 2005:15). He notes that Stalin had even ordered “not to introduce any social reform other than the reduction of land rents *for the time being*” (emphasis added). The Soviet Army, in addition, courted the rightwing nationalist Christian leader Cho Man-shik for the leadership of the North. Because of Cho’s recalcitrant opposition to Soviet policies, he was arrested in February 1946 and eventually executed in October 1950 after the outbreak of the Korean War. Representative of the conservative Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy and its aversion to social revolution, the military occupation command did

not want a situation it could not control. But rather than eliminating the mass action of the Korean people altogether – something the bureaucracy almost never did in the buffer states (Frank 2005) – the Soviets (consisting also of a good number of ethnic Koreans from the USSR), with the native Stalinist leadership, bridled the Korean mass movement and mobilized national consciousness for their own purposes and objectives. A base of mass political support was now needed in the predominantly poor-peasant population.

### **Land Reform, Nationalization, and the Korean War**

On 8 February 1946, the Soviet military administration authorized the founding of the North Korean Provisional People's Committee (NKPPC), a de facto regime that was replaced with the North Korean People's Committee (NKPC) in the succeeding year. CCP guerrilla leader and Soviet Army captain Kim Il Sung, whom the occupation command had placed in a position of power and presented to the public as a national hero on 14 October 1945, was elected chairman of the NKPPC. Foundation of this organization was followed by the Law on Land Reform (5 March 1946) and the Law on the Nationalization of Industry, Railways, Transport, Communications, and Banks (10 August 1946) – not to mention anti-illiteracy campaigns, gender equality laws, and establishment of the eight-hour workday – enacted under Soviet Army supervision. Historian Charles K. Armstrong mentions that the initial aim of land reform was confiscation from Japanese colonial occupiers, yet this changed in February 1946 to confiscation from big indigenous landlords. Wholesale appropriations from native landowners were not carried out – unless holdings exceeded 5 *chongbo* (12.25 acres) or belonged to absentee landlords, collaborators, and religious organizations – and less than 2 percent of confiscated land became state property. (Over 1 million *chongbo*, or more than 2 million acres, was confiscated, and some 700,000 peasant households were recipients of redistributed land; former landlords were permitted to receive smaller plots of land, but only in another county.) While nationalization of communication, electricity, railways, and transportation was completed by the end of 1946, this coexisted with private ownership in medium- and small-scale industries, such as fishing, lumber, pharmaceuticals, and light consumer goods. By 1947, over 90 percent of all northern industries was state owned. An economic planning bureau, basing itself on the Soviet

Stalinist model and, to some extent, on the Japanese state capitalist model, was already established by the NKPPC in March 1946 (Armstrong 2003:76-9, 156-8).

Consonant with the Menshevik theory of two stages (bourgeois-democratic and socialist), nationalization and land reform in northern Korea were part of the bourgeois-democratic revolution – the so-called “anti-imperialist, anti-feudal democratic revolution” (*panje panbonggŏn minjujuŭi hyŏngmyŏng*) – with no mention of socialism or communism in the official propaganda. Reforms were presented as “broad-based and democratic, patriotic and anti-Japanese” and congruent with the “democratic stage of capitalist development” (Armstrong 2003:81), which would supposedly lay the basis for the national stage of “socialist revolution,” said to have begun in 1947 (Armstrong 2003:74). Collectivization would not start in 1948 as it did in the Eastern European satellite countries. Ostensibly in response to what may have been perceived as a less threatening geo-security situation in Northeast Asia, the Soviet Army was withdrawn from North Korea by the end of December 1948, three months after the founding of the DPRK. U.S. troops followed suit soon thereafter and left the Republic of Korea (ROK), which was proclaimed on 15 August 1948. Besides North Korea, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia were the only two other exceptions to the rule of maintaining a Soviet military presence in the buffer states (Szalontai 2005:273n121). Despite the departure of Soviet and U.S. troops, this could not resolve the deep-going contradictions laid by the arbitrary division of the Korean Peninsula and the entrenchment of two politically irreconcilable regimes: one formally appealing to workers, poor peasants, and intellectuals in the North and the other appealing to landowners, capitalists, and the colonial elite in the South.<sup>5</sup>

The processes that were leading to the Stalinist-Menshevik stage of “socialist revolution” in North Korea were hastened in the aftermath of the Korean War – a civil

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<sup>5</sup> The formal appeal to workers, peasants, and intellectuals is seen in the emblem of the Workers’ Party of Korea, which consists of a hammer, sickle, and writing brush. North Korean sources credit the choice of symbols to Kim Il Sung, who reportedly conceived them in response to a design consisting of a worker with a hammer, a farmer plowing, and a smelter with a metal rod. The emblem is said to represent Kim’s line of building a “mass political party” (*Korean News* 2000). That is consistent with the “united front” policies he advanced in the 1930s anti-colonial guerrilla struggle, when he fought under the Chinese Communist Party, and in the 1940s state-building period under the Soviet Army. As Kim said on 17 November 1945: “In order to carry the nation-building to success, we should unite all patriotic democratic forces into one. We should unite the whole nation including the workers, peasants, patriotic intellectuals, religious people and conscientious national capitalists” (Kim 1989:3).



war between the Northern and Southern state-regimes that was expressive of the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist mass movement of the post-Second World War period. Pablo, who was the co-founder with Mandel of the *deformed workers' state* theory, had, in spite of his emerging revisionism, commented in September 1950 that “this country [Korea] was artificially divided along the line of the 38th parallel by the mutual agreement of Moscow and Washington and that there can be no question of two ‘nations’ in which one can be accused of acts of ‘aggression’ or of ‘invasion’ against the other.” The conflict “began as a *national* civil war, for the unity and *independence* of the country, and then developed into a *revolutionary anti-imperialist* war” (Pablo 2009a; italics in original). Apart from occasional North-South border fighting and Southern provocations to “march North,” some of the first indicators of the forthcoming conflagration were the South Korean general strike of September 1946 against the U.S. military government, the October 1946 uprising, and the revolts in 1948 against the military-police Rhee dictatorship that was installed by the U.S. occupation forces. With the approval of Stalin and Mao, Kim Il Sung and the North Korean Stalinist leadership, banking on the insurrectionary and revolutionary moods of their Southern brothers and sisters, launched a military offensive against the ROK regime on 25 June 1950 in the hope of achieving national unification. Mao’s victory in the Chinese Revolution of 1949 had greatly emboldened Kim in his desire for the “liberation” of South Korea (Szalontai 2005:25-6). Despite the largely Second World War vintage of Soviet-supplied North Korean weapons, not to mention political differences between the Northern regime and Southern-based anti-Rhee guerrilla resistance, North Korean forces overrode the Republic of Korea by September. One should note that United States and United Nations forces were already committed to the peninsula by July. The ICFI has said the sweeping Northern victory in the first three months of the war was not a consequence of military strength alone, but the result of “hatred of U.S. imperialism and its puppet regime” and that “[i]t may be more correct to speak of the revolutionary movement of the masses of both North and South Korea against imperialism” during the war (Talbot and Talbot 2009). That appraisal is plausible in view of what military historian Allan R. Millett has called the South Korean “people’s war” of 1948 to 1950, which entered its first phase of “revolutionary socialist insurrection” in 1945 (Millett 2004:20, 36).

Despite the support the South Korean “people’s war” lent to the (North) Korean People’s Army, United States and United Nations intervention and the massive U.S. saturation bombing campaign against North Korea rendered total destruction of its national economy and infrastructure, as well as state and private property, with some two million civilian deaths by the time the armistice agreement was signed on 27 July 1953. Chinese “volunteer” units from the People’s Liberation Army had driven U.S. forces out of North Korea in July 1951 and ultimately saved the country from obliteration. Kim Il Sung said that as a consequence of the war “everyone became a proletarian, so to speak,” and “socialist transformation” was more urgent because capitalist trade and industry were nearly non-existent (Kim 1972:4; Kim 1968:19). There are, however, other political reasons for the rapid centralization, industrialization, and stratification of postwar North Korea. The devastated and vulnerable North Korean state, which would be under Chinese occupation until 1958, was confronted with U.S. military encirclement, troops being stationed in South Korea and Japan; the politically destabilizing effects of the tactically motivated “de-Stalinization” campaign in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries; and a precarious balancing act in the emergent Sino-Soviet dispute. With the *Juche* speech of 1955, an anti-Soviet reformist warning to Kim Il Sung’s rivals, and the North Korean Great Purge (1956–1960), which empowered Kim’s Manchurian guerrilla faction by eliminating pro-Soviet and pro-reformist factions in the WPK, he and his supporters in the state bureaucracy embarked on the Maoist-influenced Chollima Movement (1956–1961), an ultra-leftist orthodox Stalinist policy of rapid industrialization and forced collectivization, in an effort to build a national “socialist economy,” secure power and privileges, and defend the state-regime. These events were followed by the militarization of North Korean society, as encapsulated in the 1962 slogan “Arms in the one hand and a hammer and sickle in the other!” and a second purge in 1967. Post-bellum North Korea was fully consolidated as a national-Stalinist state and, being a non-COMECON member, claimed to have established a “socialist industrial-agricultural state” and a “triumphant socialist system” by 1961, an independent, self-reliant “socialist system free from exploitation and oppression” (Kim 1968:11, 12, 20). This period coincides with the eruption of the Sino-Soviet split (1961–1963) and with Kim’s public announcement of *Juche* in 1965 as an “independent stand” (Kim 1968:36). North Korea, in reality, was

politically repressive, dependent on Soviet and Chinese assistance, and had trade relations with the Eastern European buffer states, which were more contrastingly assimilated and integrated into the Soviet system: economically, socially, and politically.

### **Bonapartism and *Juche* Ideology**

When the Second World Congress of the Fourth International in 1948 mentioned the simultaneous existence of a “bourgeois function and structure” and an “extreme form of Bonapartism” in the buffer states, the conception of Bonapartism pointed to a form of dictatorship in which “[t]he Stalinist apparatus had acquired a great *degree* of independence in relation to the proletariat and the bourgeoisie” (North 1988:145; emphasis added). That independence being one of degree, not of kind, did not signify true independence from world capitalism. Bonapartism, as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin use the term, is a political regime that balances unstably between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, ultimately serving the class interests of the bourgeoisie and imperialism, that is, the domination of finance capital. In reference to the postwar national-Stalinist states, Bonapartism meant that these hybrid socioeconomic formations were agencies of imperialism, in the final analysis. Application of the orthodox Marxist conception of Bonapartism to Stalinism was first introduced by Trotsky in the 1930s. Trotsky, in his classic analysis of the Stalinist Soviet Union in *The Revolution Betrayed*, called Bonapartism a “regime of crisis.” Soviet Bonapartism, a new historical type resting upon a police and officer corps and on a workers’ state, was the outcome of the belated world revolution, he explained (Trotsky 2007c). The basis of Soviet Bonapartism was a *degenerated workers’ state*, and Stalin consolidated his Bonapartist rule by liquidating all forms of workers’ democracy and usurping political power through the strangulation of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviets (workers’ councils) (North 1988:486). In contrast to Soviet Bonapartism, North Korean Bonapartism does not rest on the historical foundations of a workers’ state. Rather, Bonapartism in North Korea was congenital when the state was created under the Soviet Army, and North Korean Bonapartist rule would assume a more totalitarian character when Kim Il Sung became an all-powerful dictator after the Korean War.

Structurally inherent to *deformed workers' states*, Bonapartism is not peculiar to North Korea. Tim Wohlforth, a leader of a minority opposition tendency in the Socialist Workers Party (U.S.) from 1961 to 1964,<sup>6</sup> made the following statement on the subject of Bonapartism in his 1961 document “Cuba and the Deformed Workers States”:

*[A]ll the emerging deformed workers states – Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia, China, North Korea, North Vietnam, Cuba – went through transitional periods of more or less extended periods of time during which a Bonapartist state apparatus administering a capitalist economy was transformed into a state apparatus, still Bonapartist, administering a nationalized economy. (Wohlforth 2006; italics in original)*

Interestingly, a decade after the Third World Congress – with its exclusive reference to the Soviet buffers as *deformed workers' states* – the FI theory became a general classification for all states with a Soviet-style planned economy and state ownership of the means of production minus the proletariat in power. Wohlforth did not, however, demonstrate his claims with economic analysis, but explained his position by way of listing five political characteristics common to the emergent *deformed workers' states*:

(1) the revolution was led by petty-bourgeois strata who were forced to go beyond capitalist limits; (2) basing itself on the new army, the old army and the old state apparatus are destroyed and replaced with a new state apparatus free, at least in part, from direct capitalist control; (3) after a period of cohabitation with capitalism, under pressure from imperialism and from the masses, all capitalist holdings of any real significance are taken over; (4) the new state apparatus exhibits a determination to defend these new property forms from imperialism

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<sup>6</sup> The context for opposition was the reorientation of Cannon and the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) to Pablo's International Secretariat (IS). Only four years after the 1953 split initiated by Cannon, the American Trotskyist leader and the SWP began considering reunification with the IS. Adapting to the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and similarly appraising Cuba as a workers' state, the two organizations held a unification congress in 1963. Wohlforth, who was on the leftwing of the SWP and eventually expelled for his differences with the leadership, formed the American Committee for the Fourth International (ACFI) in 1964. The ACFI was founded as the Workers League (WL), predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, in 1966, with Wohlforth as its first national secretary. Responsible for a political crisis in the WL in the early 1970s, Wohlforth was voted out of his position by the Central Committee in 1974. He resigned from the WL and became an anti-Trotskyist.

but at the same time rules in a Bonapartist fashion free from the control of the masses; (5) the new government tends to base its outlook on a nationalist rather than a proletarian internationalist outlook. (Wohlforth 2006)

Accordingly, Wohlforth emphasized that “we must reject as a distortion of reality a view which gives undue weight in the process of forming deformed workers states to the working class or to the ‘working class character’ of these Stalinist parties in such countries as China, North Korea, and North Vietnam” (Wohlforth 2006). The *deformed workers’ states* were Bonapartist from birth. They were never nor could they be ascribed as proletarian states. One distinction Wohlforth did draw among these hybrid state forms is that while those in the Eastern European buffer zone, excluding Yugoslavia, involved no “indigenous revolutionary process” in their historical origin and were transformed under the Soviet Army, “[t]he other deformed workers states emerged from civil wars with a certain mass base.” That was specifically the case in Yugoslavia, China, and Cuba, where the new state apparatuses were based on an essentially peasant army (Wohlforth 2006). North Korea, too, had essentially peasant and military foundations, and it emerged from the post-liberation civil war as an even more Bonapartist political formation.

In 1945 to 1950, under Soviet Army supervision and tutelage, North Korea had a population out of which 72.54 percent was poor peasant in 1945. When the DPRK was officially proclaimed in 1948, 62 percent of party members belonged to the same social demographic (Armstrong 2003:110, 242). Not surprisingly, the Korean People’s Army (KPA) recruited its rank and file from the peasant youth. After the Korean War in 1950 to 1953, the KPA, headed by Kim Il Sung’s peasant guerrillas from the 1930s, stood as the most meaningful national organization after the WPK and was vital to those in supreme power (Scalapino and Lee 1972:496). North Korea came out of the war with a primarily peasant population that was made more amenable to the national-Stalinist Pyongyang regime. That is attributable to the transformation of the national civil war into an anti-imperialist war when the United States invaded North Korea. (There is also the fact that many people who opposed the North Korean regime fled to the South during the conflict.) Political scientist Byoung-Lo Philo Kim highlights that the extremely traumatic U.S. bombing campaign – resulting in the destruction of 99 percent of all above-ground

structures, a significant number of orphans and broken families, 2.5 million deaths out of a population of 10 million, and 75 percent of North Koreans either killed or injured – created a “sociological base” for the acceptance of Kim Il Sung and his emergent *Juche* ideology (Kim 1995:169-70). Kim could thus claim in April 1955 that “*Our Party* has now become a powerful and reliable Party that enjoys the love and confidence of the entire Korean people and *is fully capable of shaping their destinies*” (Kim Il Sung 1964:3; emphasis added). The U.S. invasion and bombardment enabled the WPK to assert its complete dictatorship.

*Juche*, which literally means “subject” and was not initially conceived as an ideological worldview, but signified the nationalist program of the “Korean revolution,” was a product of party debates over postwar economic reconstruction, Kim Il Sung’s struggle for legitimacy inside the WPK and bureaucratic state apparatus, and the threat of the Soviet “de-Stalinization” campaign of bureaucratic-reformism. The problem began when the dead Stalin’s immediate successor, Georgy Malenkov, initiated a new economic policy that modified the previous one of prioritizing heavy industry (Okonogi 1994). That caused a serious political debate in the so-called “Communist camp.” Kim, following the orthodox Stalinist line, advocated heavy industrial development, particularly machine-building industry and rapid agricultural collectivization, whereas the opposition emphasized production of consumer goods and greater investment in agriculture with a relaxing of collectivization as per Malenkov’s policy. Kim was seeking a more politically independent position from Moscow and openly attacked the inner-party opposition at the 1955 April Plenum of the Central Committee of the WPK. He characterized his rivals as “factionists” and “rats,” saying, “If we do not catch the rat in good time, it multiplies its young and makes holes here and there and may possibly ruin a house [i.e., the party] in the end” (Kim Il Sung 1964:13). With Malenkov’s ouster in February 1955 and replacement by Nikita Khrushchev, who advocated the heavy industry line, Kim’s position was strengthened; however, he had already recognized the political risks of the incipient “de-Stalinization” that began under Malenkov and which Khrushchev would carry through. Kim delivered the *Juche* speech in December, repeating arguments from the April Plenum and stressing that while it was important to solidarize with the Soviet Union and China, North Korean national interests would come first; Soviet and Chinese

methods would be appropriated according to and in subordination to those interests; and Soviet-style tactical reform measures would not be adopted. The subject (*juche*) of the party program was none other than the “Korean revolution,” Kim asserted, necessitating that Soviet Marxism-Leninism be “applied creatively” (i.e., Koreanized) to “suit the specific conditions” of North Korea (Kim 2008). That was *Juche* ideology in embryo.

When Khrushchev delivered his “secret speech” to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on February 1956, denouncing Stalin’s abuses and cult of personality, this political declaration greatly emboldened the tactical-reformist opposition in the WPK. By August, Kim initiated the Great Purge, eliminating his opponents and establishing uncontested Bonapartist rule. Marxism-Leninism of the “applied creatively” variety was Kim’s nationalist strategy to secure and maintain power. He, however, could not call his brand of national-Stalinism by another name because North Korea was completely reliant on Soviet and Chinese aid in the aftermath of the Korean War. The *Juche* speech thus remained an internal political document, only to become public in 1960 (Okonogi 1994:197) – that is, as the Sino-Soviet dispute was rupturing into an open and irreconcilable split. With shortfalls in aid from the foreign sponsors and the worsening international conflict, it was necessary for North Korea to maintain a “myth of equidistance” and assume a publically independent or neutral position (Hunter 1983). *Juche* was consequently presented as an ideology in December 1962 (Kang 2001:363). Some of the first transliterations of the word, “Jooche,” appeared in 1961 in *Documents of the Fourth Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea* and in the 1964 English edition of the 1955 *Juche* speech (Kim et al. 1961:103, 310, 365; Kim 1964). The slogan was formally defined as an “independent stand” during Kim’s lecture at the Ali Archam Academy of Social Sciences in Indonesia in April 1965, where the North Korean leader received an honorary doctorate. There, Kim articulated the four principles of “*Juche* in ideology, independence in politics, self-sustenance in the economy and self-defence in national defence” (Kim 1968:38). Bound up as *Juche* was with Kim Il Sung’s authority in an independent national-Stalinist state balancing between the competing strategic interests of the Soviet Union and China, *Juche* was systemized as a justification for his personal dictatorship, which embodied the political interests of the party-state bureaucracy. In 1968, a year after the second WPK purge, *Juche*

historiography was promulgated, making the history of North Korea the history of Kim Il Sung (Petrov 2003). At this time, the ultra-leftist Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) had exploded, straining Kim’s relations with China and giving him more reason to stress political self-reliance. Such developments eventually compelled North Korea to join the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in August 1975, an organization Kim called a “mighty anti-imperialist revolutionary force” (Kim 1976). The NAM, however, was a politically and ideologically heterogeneous entity and essentially bourgeois nationalist.

North Korea formally declared political independence from the Soviet Union and China in the 1972 Socialist Constitution, which enshrined *Juche* as the state ideology, while diplomatically referring to the national doctrine as a “creative application of Marxism-Leninism to our country’s reality” (Socialist Constitution 1972:2). Within two years, *Juche* was being presented by Kim’s son and heir apparent, Kim Jong Il (1942–2011), as an anthropocentric “philosophy” structured on the subjective idealist and antiquarian Confucian axiom “man is the master of everything and decides everything,” the basic propositions being that “man” is the “main factor” in the world and possesses three “social attributes,” namely, “independence, creativity, and consciousness” (Kim 1974).<sup>7</sup> By 1976, Kim Jong Il said his father’s purported ideas should no longer be called “contemporary Marxism-Leninism” but Kimilsungism, a system of “theories, strategies, and tactics” specific to the Korean national situation (Kim 1976). The term “Kimilsungism” had already appeared in the North Korean press in 1973 and was proclaimed by Kim Jong Il in 1974 (Lim 2009:59, 63). Boosting the North Korean leader’s image by implicitly drawing an analogy to the three sources and components of Marxism famously described by Lenin (German philosophy, English political economy, and French socialism), Kim Jong Il stated that Kimilsungism was composed of “three elements” – “the *Juche* idea and the revolutionary theory and leadership method.” *Juche*, moreover, was declared to be so original that it could not “be explained within the framework of materialistic dialectics” (Kim 1976).

Basically, Marxism-Leninism and dialectical materialism were foreign ideas associated with another country, the Soviet Union, and they had to be replaced with

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<sup>7</sup> See Alzo David-West, “Between Confucianism and Marxism-Leninism: *Juche* and the Case of Chŏng Tasan,” *Korean Studies* 35, (2011), 93-121, 104, 107-108.



“original” North Korean national conceptions for the justification of Kim Il Sung. From the 1980s, *Juche* was transformed into a political religion or political theology (Park 1996:14). After the Soviet Union, Eastern Bloc, and COMECON collapsed in 1989 to 1991, Marxism-Leninism was quickly removed from the 1992 North Korean revised constitution, both for its lack of profit in a post-Soviet world and because it could exacerbate the ideological crisis that confronted the state leadership. *Juche* was an “original revolutionary philosophy” that had overcome the immaturities and limitations of dialectical and historical materialism, insisted Kim Jong Il (Kim 1996). With the post-Soviet economic crisis and catastrophic great famine of 1996 to 1999, *Juche*, with its nationalist Stalinist programmatic orientation, would find ways to accommodate capitalist reform measures with provisos in the 1998 Kim Il Sung constitution. Danton R. Ford of Kyungnam University has noted that despite the “communist” challenges of a collective and mass mentality in North Korea, the core values of *Juche* – independence, self-reliance, self-determination, and the role of institutions to serve the “people” – are in tune with the foundational principles of “democratic capitalism” (Ford 2001:358). That is possible because national-Stalinist North Korea advanced bourgeois nationalism in its formative period before the Korean War and because *Juche* is the product of a congenitally Bonapartist state that is structurally predisposed to capitalist restoration. Unsurprisingly, the April 2009 revision of the North Korean constitution removed all references to “communism.” But that does not mean a democratic state is emerging. Not a genuine philosophy, something that involves the exercise of critical reason, *Juche* is a nationalist and pragmatic ideology, subject to a continuous process of alteration, that functions to justify the Kimilsungist regime. The present development of *Juche*, the *Songun* (military-first) idea, was first introduced in 1998 during the famine and places the army above the working class. With the military as the dominant political and economic institution in North Korea and the revised constitution stipulating the National Defense Commission chairman as the supreme leader of the state, North Korea is now officially inclined toward a military dictatorship (DailyNK 2009). That opens the possibility of the specific form of a military-capitalist dictatorship.

### **Stalinist-Menshevism and Capitalist Restoration**

North Korean history and the analysis of the Fourth International suggest that the transition to capitalism in present-day North Korea is a structurally predetermined restoration brought upon by the prolonged degradation of the social and economic infrastructure through the program and policies of *socialism in one country*, the loss of Soviet subsidies, and the loss of the COMECON trading bloc, even though North Korea was not a formal member.<sup>8</sup> Historically, Japanese colonialism and imperialism extended the infrastructure of international capitalism to Korea, modern capitalism developing by the early 1920s, though Korean capitalism was malformed in the colonial relationship. In the more industrialized North, colonial capitalist development was disrupted (in combination with the economic and social crises of the Great Depression and Second World War) with the joint U.S.-Soviet occupation and division of Korea in 1945 and the founding of southern and northern state-regimes in 1948. Shaken of thirty-five years of Japanese imperialism and the fascist-colonial economic structure of the 1930s and 1940s, northern Korea proceeded to a class-collaborationist national “united front” coalition government that oversaw by bureaucratic fiat the so-called “bourgeois-democratic revolution,” a stage of land reform, nationalizations, and limited capitalist development that would, for a certain period, precede the “socialist revolution.”

These reform measures were the implementation of the Menshevik two-stage theory. Lenin and Trotsky, the co-leaders of the Russian Revolution, had rejected this doctrine for the perspective of *world socialist revolution*. The discredited schema of the Menshevik conception was, however, resurrected by the Stalinized Comintern in 1925 and advanced for the colonial and semi-colonial countries. Alexander Martinov, a former rightwing Menshevik who joined the Soviet Communist Party in 1923, was the chief

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<sup>8</sup> South Korean economist Soo-Ho Lim explains that North Korea began decentralization reforms in the mid-1980s to weather economic difficulties with the Soviet Union and China, as well as competition with South Korea. These economic changes formed the basis for the rapid rise of markets during the famine in the mid-1990s and the adoption of a “reformist socialist system” with the July 2002 price and wage reforms. The existence of a “dual economic system” employing market and planning mechanisms has sustained the Stalinist regime, he says. Lim observes that the political and social status of managerial officials in North Korea is rising, and in the expanding market network, financiers are evolving into capitalists. He forecasts that a gradual shift to “market socialism” is in process and that marketization is irreversible and inevitable. Prospects for democratization, however, are highly unlikely, and the system could turn into a “development dictatorship” (Lim 2009).

theoretician of the two-stage theory and its corollary, the “united front” or “bloc of four classes” government of workers, peasants, petty-bourgeoisie, and national capitalists. This line was first applied in the Chinese revolution of 1925 to 1927 with disastrous results. Nonetheless, the conservative Menshevik doctrine remained the official Comintern position and was subsequently recast in Stalin’s “popular front” policy at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935, as well as in the “people’s democracy” slogan, which he reformulated in 1948 as a designation for the postwar regimes founded under the Soviet Army (Pablo 2009b), such as the Eastern European “buffer states” and North Korea. Kim Il Sung, a former CCP member who was trained in Stalinism in the CCP-led anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle in Manchuria (1931–1941) and in reconnaissance operations with the Soviet 88th Brigade (1941–1945). He accepted the Stalinist-Menshevik doctrine as seen in his line of the “anti-imperialist, anti-feudal democratic revolution,” which he articulated in his 3 October 1945 speech “On Progressive Democracy” (*Chinbojök minjujuüi e taehayö*) in Soviet-occupied northern Korea (Kim 1979:286; Kim 1976:8). That document has resonances with Mao’s January 1940 speech “On New Democracy,” confirming Kim’s training in and intimate knowledge of Soviet and Chinese Stalinism.

Despite the events of 1945 and 1948, the decisive bureaucratic liquidation of capitalist relations in North Korea occurred as a consequence of the Korean War, a conflict that led to the total destruction of North Korean industrial capacity and infrastructure, the collapse of the national economy, and to the post-bellum policies of anti-market ultra-leftism, rapid industrialization, and forced collectivization. Developments after the war were defined by Kim Il Sung’s orthodox Stalinist, anti-Soviet reformism *Juche* speech of 1955 and the Chollima Movement. (Kim permitted limited markets during food shortages in the 1960s, a period when Soviet and Chinese aid had declined as a result of the Sino-Soviet split.) Thereafter, the party-state bureaucracy concluded that it had achieved a nationally self-contained socialist society.

Existing for decades outside the profound socioeconomic-structural changes of world capitalism in the post-Second World War period – which witnessed the removal of the gold standard, the abandonment of the Bretton Woods system, the advent of computer and information technology, the rise of transnational companies, and the globalization of

production – North Korea missed out on an entire historical epoch of global capitalist development and has had to catch up in face of its protracted economic difficulties and impoverishment since the decline and collapse of the Soviet Union. Significant moments in the turn toward capitalism include the initiation of decentralization reforms and the Joint Venture Law (1984); the establishment of economic cooperation and trade with South Korea (1988); the adoption of the Foreign Investment Law (1992); the designation of capitalist Special Economic Zones at Rajin-Sŏnbong (1991), Kaesŏng (2002), Kŭmgang (2002), Sinŭiju (2002), and Hwanggumpyŏng-Wihwado (2011); and the adoption of major price and wage reforms (2002).<sup>9</sup>

Education in capitalism has also been endorsed by the national-Stalinist regime. Pyongyang opened the Rajin Business School and Information Center in 1998; the Ministry of Foreign Trade established the Center for the Study of the Capitalist System in 2000, as well as two business schools; the Pyongyang Business School, initiated with funds from the Swiss Development Cooperation Agency, graduated its first thirty students in 2005; and the economic theories of John Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman are reportedly the “basics” at Kim Il Sung University. All of this is not to say that the Pyongyang regime has no practical experience whatsoever with capitalism, international trade, obtaining foreign currency, or investing in computer and information technology. Rather, the experience is limited, and as a result, the regime has shown great interest and eagerness to learn about capitalism, particularly the principles of foreign trade and global economy (Feffer 2006; Korea Times 2007; Yoon 2007). In the case of information technology, the state leadership has stressed its importance for economic development since the mid-1990s, revising the North Korean educational system accordingly. Yet “politics has been the main culprit thwarting the development of the IT industry” (Kim 2004:192). Fundamentally, the regime is apprehensive about the potentially destabilizing effects the

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<sup>9</sup> See relevant discussion in Soo Young Choi, *North Korea's Agricultural Reforms and Challenges in the Wake of the July 1 Measures* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification); Sung Chull Kim, “The Fluctuation of Economic Institutions and the Emergence of Entrepreneurship,” *North Korea under Kim Jong Il: From Consolidation to Systemic Dissonance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 137-164; Youn Suk Kim, “Current North Korean Economy: Overview and Prospects for Change,” *North Korean Review* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2008), 16-30; and Soo-Ho Lim, “North Korea's Economic Prototype and Its Decentralization Reforms” and “The Rise of Markets within a Planned Economy: The ‘July 1st Reform’ and the Acceptance of the Second Economy” in *The Rise of Markets within a Planned Economy* (Seoul: Samsung Economic Research Institute, 2009), 35-100, 175-265.

opening-up to cyberspace entails, for example, the influx of foreign information, hackers, and foreign intelligence. Focus, therefore, has been restricted to software development at the expense of the digital economy (Kim 2004:192-4; 200-1). On 31 December 2007, North Korea launched its first internet shopping mall as part of a joint venture with a Chinese company in Shenyang that is renting the internet server (Olsen 2008; Chosun Ilbo 2008).

The necessity and process of the emergent capitalist restoration in North Korea is rationalized in the Stalinist ideology of the Pyongyang regime, which accommodates the current economic changes through tactical and pragmatic revisions of the official *Juche* state doctrine. These revisions are presented in the terms of the policy of “new thinking” (*saeroun kwanjŏm*), “our-style socialism” (*urishik sahoejuŭi*), and pragmatic socialism (*shilli sahoejuŭi*), as well as in the late Kim Jong Il’s military-first politics (*sŏngun chŏngch’i*) and military-first ideology (*sŏngun sasang*). Despite significant capitalist “reform” measures, the North Korean state is not yet a complete free-market system, that is, a system of private property and production relations based on the principle of profit maximization. The tactical changes and reorientations, which are being carried out within the preexisting ideological and programmatic Stalinist orientation of the North Korean political leadership, are implemented so as to perpetuate the existence of the privileged bureaucratic caste, which is presiding over a transitional, hybrid Stalinist state form. This process is bound up with the conditions and evolution of national-Stalinism after the Second World War.

The problems of Soviet expansionism, the post-Second World War mass movement, the Korean War, Bonapartism, and capitalist restoration in North Korea thus discussed, it is important to emphasize that the theory of the *deformed workers’ state* as conceived by the Fourth International is not a doctrine of lesser-evilism that advocates political support of North Korea against South Korea. Despite its unavoidably ambiguous name, the theory sees the unprecedented state formations that emerged in Eastern Europe and Northeast Asia in the 1940s as *deformed extensions of the Russian Revolution that are unviable in the long term*. The *deformed workers’ state* is not a state ruled by the working class, but is a bureaucratic simulacrum of a workers’ state. There are, however, nationalist and radical groups that use the phrase “deformed workers’ state” to the

contrary and as a defensive slogan, for example, “We stand for the unconditional military defense of North Korea and the other remaining deformed workers states – China, Vietnam and Cuba – against imperialist attack and domestic counterrevolution” (Workers Vanguard 2009). Such an employment of the theory is not consonant with its use in the history of the Fourth International nor with the underlying perspective of the theory based on orthodox Trotskyism (International Committee of the Fourth International 1998).

North Korea, according to the FI theory, is not a lesser evil, more progressive, or a workers’ state, but an authoritarian and deformed Bonapartist state ruled by a privileged Stalinist bureaucracy, which represses the working class, makes concessions to world capitalism, and thereby functions objectively as an “agency of imperialism” in the world labor movement, a formulation Trotsky and the FI used to characterize the Soviet Stalinist regime. The North Korean regime, to be sure, does not endorse the program of world socialist revolution, and the Pyongyang leadership openly rejects the working class as a revolutionary force (Kim 2007:5, 8, 9). Rather than defending North Korea, the internationalist-socialist perspective and principles that attend the *deformed workers’ state* theory hold that the divided Korean people must be allowed to settle their own political affairs, that U.S. troops must withdraw from South Korea, and that Stalinism in the North and capitalism in the South must be overthrown by an independent political movement of the Korean working class, in solidarity with the world working class, for a democratic workers’ government on the Korean peninsula.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to introduce and discuss the definitions and first principles of the theory of the *deformed workers’ state*, as developed by the Fourth International, and explore its relevance in appraising the political character of the North Korean state. According to the theory, North Korea was not founded in 1948 as a *dictatorship of the proletariat*, a workers’ state that is ushered in through an internationalist-socialist revolution and presided over by the self-emancipated working class. Nor is North Korea understood as a *degenerated workers’ state*, an isolated post-revolutionary workers’ state that is politically usurped by a conservative Stalinist bureaucracy. Rather, the theory conceives North Korea as a post-Second World War

hybrid, non-proletarian, transitional state (consolidated without a genuine socialist revolution) that imitates the Soviet Bonapartist system, and is ruled by a national-Stalinist regime that secures its interests within and defends the nineteenth-century bourgeois nation-state system. Deformities in states of this type are constituted in their non-working class origins and in the Stalinization of their political apparatuses and economic machinery under the conservative nationalist policy of *socialism in one country*. While similar to those of the Eastern European buffer states, the manifestations of political deformity in North Korea exhibit certain peculiarities resulting from the unique historical convergence of the domestic anti-colonial national-liberation struggle, foreign Soviet liberation-occupation, strategically advantageous geographic location, greater self-isolation, and non-membership in COMECON, which partly account for why North Korea was not immediately dragged into the decline and self-destruction of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries in 1989 to 1991. The post-Soviet era and loss of “fraternal” aid have nonetheless intensified the transitory and temporary character of the North Korean state, underlining the dubiousness of its socioeconomic viability in the long term, as the theory of the *deformed workers’ state* proposes.

As to where North Korea after 2012 is going, under the new leadership of Kim Jong Un, two general hypotheses can be drawn from the propositions of the *deformed workers’ state* theory; the historical experiences of the Soviet Union, Eastern Bloc states, and China; and the economic reforms and structural changes in North Korea today. Hypothesis 1: the restoration of capitalism through the dissolution of state planning and nationalized property, the transformation of the bureaucratic nomenclature into capitalist managers and a capitalist class, and the conversion of labor into a commodity for the extraction of surplus value and profit maximization (which could be achieved through the gradual introduction of market methods that will transitionally coexist with planning for a certain period, as in the experience of China and Vietnam); and Hypothesis 2: an organized political struggle to overturn the profit system by a new generation of North Korean workers, intellectuals, students, and youth, who are not believers in *Juche*-Stalinism and *Songun*-Stalinism, who discover the ideas of international socialism, and who form their own section of the international socialist party (which presupposes greater information inflows and a shift in social consciousness; but even if there is a

revolutionary struggle in North Korea, success is not guaranteed). These hypotheses, of course, are speculative and conditional. There is no crystal ball. That said, the potential value of the *deformed workers' state* theory is indicated in its more politically discriminating character in comparison to generic references to North Korea as a “Communist dictatorship” or “totalitarian state,” for instance. The theory also provides an alternative methodological perspective in the unresolved academic discussion on the political character of the North Korean state. But since the Fourth International theory has definitional ambiguities, since its descriptions are qualitative, and since the primary literature deals predominantly with politics, a necessary step to confirm its validity is quantitative analysis in comparative political economy. Accordingly, some things that will have to be seriously examined are the questions of social classes and social castes; ownership of property, means of production, and surplus product; the function of capital (raw materials and machinery); revenue (wages, profit, rent, and surplus value); and foreign direct investment to confirm if the socioeconomic relations and political institutions of the North Korean system are or were those of a national-Stalinist *deformed workers' state*.

### **Postscript**

This essay is based on research undertaken between 2008 and 2010. The manuscript was finished in 2011, and a revised version was accepted in early 2012, a publication delay allowing for some minor emendations in summer 2013. Shortly after the essay was accepted, the author came to the position that North Korea in the post-Soviet era is not classifiable as a *deformed workers' state* and especially not since the Pyongyang regime officially adopted market-oriented reform measures in July 2002. Recent qualitative and quantitative scholarship (political science and sociology) in North Korean studies supports this view and is assimilated in the author's “North Korea and the Contradiction of Inversion,” *North Korean Review* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2013). In North Korea today, the hereditary party-army regime presides over an authoritarian-statist market structure, with an incipient exchange economy at the service of state authority; there is decentralization and autonomous management of non-strategic sectors (e.g., light industry and regional industries); and a capitalist civil society is gradually developing in



the orbit of unregulated market relations, with private individuals pursuing their own self-interest.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Civil society refers to “a collection of private individuals, interacting with one another, but nevertheless each pursuing his own way and constituting a system apparently by accident as a by-product”; it “presents the appearance of an aggregate, consisting of various wants, impulses, and ends; cohering at one point, falling apart at another; and yet, in spite of all the struggle and separation it contains, holding together as one community” (Reyburn 1967: 214).

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