

# **THE GREAT LEADER AND THE FIGHTER PILOT**

**The True Story of the Tyrant  
Who Created North Korea and  
the Young Lieutenant Who Stole  
His Way to Freedom**

**BLAINE HARDEN**



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# INTRODUCTION

## Players and Game

### I

The man who would become the Great Leader stood on an indoor mountain of chemical fertilizer. Snow-white, stone hard, and two stories high, the mound of ammonium sulphate was eye candy for the masses, a symbol of the good life on offer from Comrade Kim Il Sung. Without fertilizer, people in North Korea go hungry, and some starve. It is true now, and it was true on 22 February 1948, when Kim had men cut the fertilizer flat on top, rig up a sound system, and conscript an audience. Three rings of soldiers, each armed with a Soviet-made submachine gun, protected the man atop the huge pile of fertilizer.

The stage was socialist realism writ large, as straightforward as it was brutal: Support Kim Il Sung and eat. Challenge him, and his men will sort you out, using guns and muscle from the Soviet Union.

Kim was thirty-five years old that day, but he looked younger, with smooth cheeks, short black hair, and a snug-fitting Mao suit. He had been back on the Korean Peninsula for just two and a half years, having spent much of his life fighting the Japanese in Northeast China. He had not yet purged, jailed, exiled, or executed all his political rivals. It would be

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another year before he had the gall to call himself the Great Leader and another decade before he would package himself as ‘the sun of mankind and the greatest man who has ever appeared in the world’.

But he was getting there. His control of the police and the army was absolute. State-owned newspapers and radio applauded his every move. His paunch was expanding with his power.

As Moscow’s chosen one – he had caught the eye of advisers close to Premier Joseph Stalin – Kim was rushing to rebuild and revolutionize a society traumatized by four decades of Japanese colonial domination. Following a Soviet script, factories were nationalized and labour unions created. The eight-hour workday became law. A mass literacy campaign taught millions of subsistence farmers and their families to read. New laws limited child labour and guaranteed women equal pay for equal work. Kim’s government seized and redistributed farmland from wealthy landlords.

Peasant farmers liked what they saw and grew more food. In cities, the poor and the young also seemed to be buying what Kim was selling. But the wealthy, the landed, and the well educated were frightened. About two million of them fled south, where, in a similarly new nation called South Korea, bullying politicians were preaching capitalism while being advised, armed, and bankrolled by the United States.

The Americans and the Soviets divided the Korean Peninsula in the anxious final days of World War II. On 11 August 1945, two American colonels working after midnight in Washington used a small National Geographic map to draw an arbitrary line across the peninsula. It tracked the thirty-eighth parallel, a border with no connection to Korea’s history, politics, or geographic features. The east-west line gave two-thirds of the peninsula’s population to South Korea, along with most of the arable land. President Harry S. Truman believed it was a good solution. Surprisingly, so did Stalin, and the deal was done. In theory, over the next five years, the wartime allies would work on their respective sides of the border to reunite Korea’s thirty million people. Unification would supposedly occur after they moved beyond the hysteria of war and developed democratic institutions.

But they did not calm down, and democracy was stillborn. The leaders who emerged, Kim in the North and Syngman Rhee in the South, were aggressive, egocentric nationalists. Each wanted to reunite Korea on his own uncompromising terms. Each wanted to rule it all, with weapons, money, and ideological window dressing from his superpower patron.

Because of the mass exodus from the North, there was far more social cohesion and political stability in Kim's realm than in Rhee's, where striking workers and farmers clashed constantly with American-armed police. An American intelligence report concluded, 'Younger people throughout North Korea, especially between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one, are beginning to believe in the Communist government.'

To build on that belief, Kim travelled to rice farms and teachers' colleges, irrigation projects and dance schools. Most often, he visited factories, where he charmed workers, listened to local complaints, and gave 'on-the-spot guidance' as state media took his picture.

That is what he was doing on the fertilizer mountain: sweet-talking, inspiring, and intimidating a crowd of ten thousand cheering supporters, most of them young. His speech was the main event for his visit to Hungnam, an industrial city on North Korea's east coast, where the Japanese had built several modern factories, including Chosen Nitrogenous Fertilizers, the largest fertilizer works in the Far East. Soviet soldiers had liberated the place in the late summer of 1945 as the defeated Japanese scurried away. Kim's government nationalized it and repaired machinery the Japanese had tried to destroy. Fertilizer was brought back into production – glorious news in a mountainous nation of subsistence farmers, tired soil, and chronic food shortages.

'Our workers are now mass-producing fertilizer essential for the peasants,' Kim said as he began his speech. Besides fertilizer, he said, the 'extremely creative enthusiasm' of Korean technicians was increasing pig-iron production and repairing hydroelectric dams. 'All this proves that we can build a prosperous, independent, and sovereign state by ourselves.'

But a 'happy society' required much more. Kim said a 'genuine people's government' must destroy the 'enslavement policies' of the

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‘American imperialists and their stooges’ and take control of the entire Korean Peninsula. He was hinting, not very subtly, at a military invasion of the South, which he was already planning.

On a secret trip to Moscow just before he launched that invasion, Kim assured Stalin that Koreans in the South would joyfully support a Communist invasion and the Americans would slink away in fear.

‘The Americans,’ he said, ‘will not risk a big war.’

## II

No Kum Sok was there that day.

He was sixteen years old and a student at Hungnam First High School, which had closed at midday in honour of Kim’s visit, as had the city’s factories. Ordered by teachers and foremen, students and workers queued up outside the fertilizer plant, where soldiers frisked them for guns and explosives. Two years earlier, someone at a rally had tossed a hand grenade at Kim. Thanks to a Soviet minder who grabbed it out of midair (and was severely wounded), Kim was not hurt. Since then, though, security had tightened.

After soldiers searched him, No entered a cavernous warehouse more than three stories high and longer than three football fields. Afternoon light drizzled down through greasy skylights. With four classmates, No climbed a ladder to a steel balcony. He watched from there as Kim – surrounded by attendants who carried his photograph and led the crowd in chants about his genius – marched into the warehouse and climbed the mound of fertilizer.

Kim radiated a raw animal magnetism and had a broad fatherly smile. The boy had never seen or heard anyone like him. The leader’s voice was strong, his language plain and powerful. To No, Kim seemed somehow larger than other human beings, although photographs and contemporary descriptions show that he was not all that large, about five feet seven inches. Workers in the factory were spellbound as Kim praised them for being the ‘prime movers of modern society’. No hung on every word.

Kim's rise to power had changed the very words the boy could speak, read, and write. When Japan ruled the peninsula, the Korean language was banned; everyone was supposed to speak Japanese. It was the only language No could fluently read and write. After Kim and the Soviets took over, Japanese was banned; speaking it was seditious. Russian replaced English as a foreign language in middle school. Baseball, the game No's father had played and loved, was condemned as a decadent waste of time. A new law banned any meeting of more than five persons without official permission. A teacher told No's class that freedom of religion would, of course, be protected under Kim's rule. But the teacher also said there would be state-enforced limits: devout Christians, if they behaved like 'superstitious fools', would not be allowed to hold jobs in the military or in the professions. The boy, whose churchgoing father had attended a missionary school, got the message. He stopped going to church. He also stopped listening to the Voice of America on the radio, fearing what he might learn and inadvertently say to teachers and classmates.

The rise of Kim Il Sung delighted several of No's relatives. His paternal grandfather called him a 'genius'. Yoo Ki Un, his maternal uncle, decorated the living room and bedrooms of his Hungnam home with photographs of Kim and Stalin. Uncle Yoo, who worked as a supervisor in a machine-assembly plant, tolerated no criticism of his leader.

To keep the peace with Uncle Yoo, to prevent his school friends from snitching on him, and to give himself a future in the new North Korea, No decided to pretend to be a 'No. 1 Communist'. He began his act soon after seeing Kim's speech, and it would save his life.

He lied on his examination for admission to the North Korean Naval Academy. In answer to questions about his family background, he wrote that his recently dead father had been a socialist-leaning labourer who hated the Japanese and loved the Great Leader. The one truth in that statement was that his father was recently dead.

No's father had been a successful manager for a Japanese industrial conglomerate. The Noguchi Corporation had built nearly all the big factories in Hungnam, including the one where Kim delivered his speech.



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Thanks to his father's career with Noguchi, No grew up rich, as measured by Korean standards. His mother, Veronica, who grew up in a well-to-do Catholic family, owned a stylish fur coat. In the heat of the North Korean summer, the family travelled to a summer cottage in the mountains. Their soy sauce was top-drawer, Kikkoman, imported from Japan.

### III

The Great Leader was staggeringly wrong about the Korean War. South Koreans never supported his invading army, and the United States did not slink away. Kim's invasion triggered a hugely destructive war with no victory, easy or otherwise, for any country involved.

Rival armies from North and South Korea, from China, and from a United Nations force dominated by the United States ranged back and forth across the Korean Peninsula for about a year before settling into a blood-soaked stalemate that lasted two more years. By the end, about 1.2 million soldiers had been killed, including more than 36,000 Americans. Territory was neither gained nor lost. There is still no official peace, only an armistice. While there were no winners, the war's biggest losers were probably the people who lived in North Korea when it began.

In an air campaign that the American public never paid much attention to, the US Air Force massively and continuously bombed North Korea for three years, turning nearly every city, town, and village in the Pennsylvania-sized country into rubble.

'We were bombing with conventional weapons everything that moved in North Korea, every brick standing on top of another,' said Dean Rusk, a key supporter of American involvement in the Korean War and later a secretary of state during the Vietnam War. A Soviet postwar study of American bomb damage in the North found that 85 per cent of all structures in the country were destroyed. The air force ran out of targets to blow up and burn. While there are no numbers from the North Korean government for civilians killed, the official population of the country declined during the war by 1,311,000, or 14 per cent. General Curtis LeMay, head of the Strategic Air Command during the Korean

War, estimated the percentage of civilian deaths to be even higher. 'Over a period of three years or so, we killed off – what – twenty per cent of the population [1.9 million people],' he said.

LeMay urged his bosses, at the start of the war, to force an immediate surrender by using massive bombing to kill civilians quickly and in large numbers. But politicians in Washington found that to be 'too horrible,' LeMay said, so they used massive bombing to kill civilians slowly and in large numbers.

Kim's control of North Korea survived the destruction. He made himself the centre – the fatherly leader of a revolutionary family – around which a traumatized society could unify, rebuild, and find direction.

Being wrong never seemed to hurt the Great Leader. When events contradicted his promises or challenged his policies, he invented a new reality and forced his people to accept it. In North Korea's version of history, war began when South Korea and the United States invaded the North. It ended with a heroic North Korean victory orchestrated by his brilliant generalship. The pivotal roles played in the war by the Soviet Union, which armed the North, and by China, which fought the Americans to a draw on the ground and saved Kim from his ineptitude as a military commander, were airbrushed away.

To make his fictions credible at home, Kim isolated North Korea from the outside world. It became a prison state, with the Great Leader as warden. He decided what inmates could know, where they could live, if they could travel. Hundreds of thousands of security agents spied on everyone, rewarding citizens when they informed on one another. People were sorted geographically based on his perception of their loyalty. Those judged to be 'wrong thinkers' were sent to labour camps in the remote mountains, where hundreds of thousands of prisoners and their family members died. After more than half a century, these camps are still going strong. A United Nations commission of inquiry has found that guards in the camps commit 'unspeakable atrocities' that 'resemble the horrors' of Nazi Germany and constitute crimes against humanity.

By keeping North Koreans in a cage for half a century and feeding them lies, Kim succeeded in convincing them that he was indeed

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a wonderful human being – and that *his* No. 1 enemy, the United States, would forever be *their* enemy. Although he died of natural causes in 1994, Kim lives on among his people as their Eternal President.

For outsiders struggling to understand contemporary North Korea, Kim's pivotal importance also lives on. His rise to absolute power is the essential story that explains the government's belligerence, paranoia, and sustained mistreatment of its own people. The feudal, caste-bound social system that he invented is still in place.

Before dying, the Great Leader tried to make sure his creation would never die – and that his bloodline would always rule. He set up a Stalinist monarchy that crowned his eldest son, Kim Jong Il, as leader. When Kim Jong Il died in 2011, power passed to his third son, Kim Jong Un, who was just twenty-eight when he took command.

For all their fakery and falsified history, three generations of dictators named Kim have found – and continue to find – legitimacy from a true and ghastly story of the Korean War: the US Air Force's bombing and napalming of the North. It was a propaganda gift to the Kim family that keeps on giving.

'[Our people] have strong anti-US sentiments because they suffered great damage at the hands of the US imperialists during the war,' Kim Il Sung told American journalists in 1972. 'Since the situation is tense, we cannot but continue stepping up preparations for war. We make no secret of this. Who can guarantee that the US imperialists will not attack this country again? What is most important in our preparations is to educate all the people to hate US imperialism.'

Under Kim's son and grandson, that hatred has been reinforced daily, as the government works hard to keep the old war terrifyingly fresh. State media constantly remind North Koreans that their parents and grandparents were incinerated and dismembered by Americans. Schoolchildren are still trained to bayonet dummies of American soldiers. State media still lie about who invaded whom during the Korean War. Sixty years after the war ended, hundreds of thousands of North Koreans gathered in Pyongyang's May Day Stadium to celebrate their

‘victory’. Outside the stadium on the day of the celebration, a book was on sale, titled *The US Imperialists Started the Korean War*.

‘It may seem strange to Americans when we hear that North Koreans are worried about an attack from the United States, but from their point of view it is not strange at all,’ said Kathryn Weathersby, a Korean War scholar. ‘It is still the 1950s in North Korea and the conflict with South Korea and the United States is still going on. People in the North feel backed into a corner and threatened. It is, of course, very useful for the Kim family to keep them afraid.’

The US bombing narrative – together with semi-fictional news reports about what the imperialists are up to now – has given the Kim dynasty what it desperately needs: justification for spending nearly all its resources on nuclear weapons, long-range ballistic missiles, and a huge military that conscripts every young North Korean.

As important, the perceived persistence of the American threat – and the Kim family’s sacred duty to fight against it – is an all-purpose excuse for the country’s long slide into isolation, poverty, and hunger. The family’s argument goes like this: Sure, it’s miserable living in North Korea, but don’t blame us. Imagine how much worse it would be if we weren’t protecting you from the American bastards. Never forget, their bombs killed Grandma.

## IV

No Kum Sok carefully researched his role as a true believer in Communism. He convinced an instructor at the naval academy that he had the right ideological stuff to fight the Americans in the air. Soon after he joined the North Korean air force, he discovered he was better at flying than he was at regurgitating Communist platitudes. He certainly liked it more.

At nineteen, he became the youngest jet fighter pilot on either side of the Korean War. He flew more than a hundred combat missions in a Soviet-made MiG-15, a formidable killing machine for its time. On a

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remote runway during the war, he personally showed off one of these fighter jets to the Great Leader and his young son Kim Jong Il. As they inspected the aircraft, No gave serious thought to assassinating the elder Kim but never mustered the courage to pull his service pistol out of its holster.

Throughout the Korean War, MiGs tormented and shot down American bombers. They forced the Americans to bomb under cover of night. In thousands of encounters along the border between North Korea and China, MiGs faced off against American warplanes in the world's first all-jet dogfights. The US Far East Command was so obsessed with MiGs that it offered a \$100,000 reward (about \$900,000 today) to the first enemy pilot who delivered one to an American air base.

In the cockpit of his MiG, No dressed like a World War I flying ace. He wore a leather flying jacket, leather gloves, puffy blue cotton trousers, and tall leather riding boots. His flight helmet predated the jet age by at least three decades. It was made of leather and looked not unlike the one Snoopy wore in the *Peanuts* comic strip.

No's pretend persona as a Communist fanatic was sorely tested in jet-to-jet combat. He tried to seem gung-ho in the eyes of his fellow pilots, yet he avoided close encounters with American fighter pilots. He quickly learned that they had better flying skills – and that they were feverishly competing with one another to kill pilots like him.

Back on the ground, No compensated for his caution in the sky by ramping up his Red fanaticism. He volunteered to give dramatic readings of Kim Il Sung's speeches. When North Korean pilots gathered for meetings of self-criticism, he denounced them for not showing enough love to the glorious leader. Having known pilots who were executed for perceived wrong thinking, he worried that someone would see through his act and order him shot.

No's performance ended on a sunny September morning in 1953. He climbed into a MiG-15 for what was supposed to be a routine combat-readiness mission.

He knew nothing of the much-publicized \$100,000 reward that the US military had promised to any pilot who delivered a combat-ready

MiG. Nor could he have known that in Washington the new American president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, disapproved of paying cash for an enemy airplane. Ike viewed it as a bribe beneath the dignity of the United States. He did not want a stolen MiG and did not want to pay taxpayer money to a Commie turncoat.

As he took off that morning, No did know that Kim Il Sung had created a new law authorizing his government to execute the family and friends of defectors.

North Korean ground control became suspicious when the MiG did not return on time. An impatient voice squawked over No's headphones, using coded language to ask, Where the hell are you?

He did not reply.

**PART I**  
**GUERRILLA**  
**AND RICH BOY**

# CHAPTER 1

## Beginnings

### I

Kim Il Sung led a guerrilla raid on the night of 4 June 1937, that, in his words, ‘heralded the dawn of the liberation of Korea’.

The attack on Pochonbo, a speck of a town on the Korean border, did nothing of the sort. It was a strategically insignificant pinprick. But it mightily annoyed the Japanese. Over the next three years, they crushed Kim’s insurgency. By the end of 1940, his guerrillas were dead, in prison, or holed up in the Soviet Union.

Pochonbo, though, was a fine piece of personal branding. The Japanese elevated Kim Il Sung to their list of most wanted Red bandits. International newspapers reported the raid and his gallant leadership. Thanks to Pochonbo and a handful of other guerrilla strikes that stung the Japanese in the late 1930s, Kim became a household name among millions of Koreans who seethed under their Japanese colonial masters. To an ill-educated peasantry hungry for heroes, he became a legend. Stories spread about his wizardry: he fashioned bombs out of pine cones, walked across rivers on leaves, and could make himself invisible.

Kim treasured Pochonbo as his finest military moment. He and



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about two hundred partisans crossed the Yalu River on rafts from Manchuria, as northeastern China was then called, and sneaked into the Korean village.

‘At 10 p.m. sharp, I raised my pistol high and pulled the trigger. Everything that I had ever wanted to say to my fellow countrymen back in the homeland for over ten years was packed into that one shot reverberating through the street that night. The gunshot, as our poets described, was both a greeting to our motherland and a challenge to the Japanese imperialist robbers whom we were about to punish.’

The punishment that followed was real but limited. A post office, a police station, and a few other buildings were burned. A handful of Japanese policemen were killed or wounded. Kim and his men rounded up about ninety new guerrilla recruits and fled that night across the river to a hideout in Manchuria.

Before they left, Kim wrote, admiring townsfolk asked him to give a speech.

Looking round the crowd, I found their eyes, as bright as stars, all focused on me.

Taking off my cap and waving my uplifted arm, I made a speech stressing the idea of sure victory and resistance against Japan. I concluded with the words: ‘Brothers and sisters, let us meet again on the day of national liberation!’

When I left the square in front of [the town hall], which was a mass of flames, my heart felt heavy and full of pain, as if pierced with a knife. We were all leaving a part of ourselves behind in the small border town as we marched away, and the hearts of those left behind wailed silently as they watched us go.

The legend of Kim Il Sung is part Robin Hood, part Harry Potter, and partly true. For many years, Kim’s political adversaries – including South Korea and the United States – made little effort to sort out fact from fiction. A rumour spread in North and South Korea that the real Kim Il Sung was killed in Manchuria sometime after the Pochonbo raid and,

with the assistance of the Soviet Union, was replaced by a much younger guerrilla leader. The fake Kim, rumour had it, was a Soviet stooge who became the Great Leader. A confidential American intelligence biography stated flatly in 1952 that Kim was an ‘imposter’.

As rumours go, this one had extraordinary staying power. It gained credence because few Koreans knew what Kim looked like or that he was so young, just twenty-five when he led the raid on Pochonbo. Adding to the confusion, he changed his name, taking the nom de guerre Kim Il Sung (meaning ‘become the sun’), which other partisan fighters in Manchuria had used. The fake-Kim story was especially appealing to anti-Communists in South Korea, where for years it was a propaganda staple that undermined the legitimacy of North Korea.

The rumour also persisted because of Kim’s character. He was a shameless self-promoter. All his life, he exaggerated his achievements to the point of absurdity. A key to understanding Kim is ‘his enormous self-regard,’ writes Bradley K. Martin, one of his biographers. ‘[He] developed very early a preference for the company of people who acknowledged him as a genius, hero, and great man.’

The speech Kim claims to have delivered in Pochonbo is a case in point. As the village burned and his men killed and looted, did Kim really take time for grandiloquence in front of starstruck peasants? One of his longtime partisan comrades in Manchuria said the Pochonbo speech was fabricated, self-serving piffle: ‘Here he was busy running away. What type of mass speech could he give?’

Narcissism and nonsense notwithstanding, Kim Il Sung was not an imposter. Photographs and government records, along with Korean, Chinese, and Russian eyewitnesses, verify that the young guerrilla leader who led the raid on Pochonbo was the same young man (albeit slightly older and better nourished) who rose to power in North Korea.

He was born Kim Song Ju in a village near Pyongyang in 1912. His father was a teacher and practitioner of herbal medicine who was more educated and less poor than most Koreans of that time and place. His father attended Sungsil Middle School in Pyongyang, which was founded and run by American Presbyterian missionaries. The city then had the

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fastest-growing Christian community in East Asia and was sometimes described as the Jerusalem of the East. Kim's mother came from an educated, Christian family. In his memoirs, Kim acknowledges that both his parents attended church regularly, taking him and his two younger brothers along. His father taught him to play a pump organ in church.

But it was great-power manoeuvring, not religion or missionary teaching, that shaped Kim's world, pushing him and his family into exile in Manchuria and transforming him, while still in middle school, into a Communist guerrilla leader who spoke excellent Chinese and was eager to fight Japan.

Imperial Japan established complete control of the Korean Peninsula in 1905, after defeating Russian naval forces and accepting a peace proposed by President Theodore Roosevelt, who won a Nobel Peace Prize for his trouble. The backstory of that deal was less than noble. It was a trade-off between rising colonial powers in Asia: Japan agreed not to interfere with America's occupation and exploitation of the Philippines, and the United States, despite a late-nineteenth-century treaty of 'amity and commerce' with Korea, quietly accepted Japanese dominion over the Korean Peninsula.

In 1910, two years before Kim was born, Japan formally annexed Korea and began to force Koreans to accept Japanese culture as their own. This pushed hundreds of thousands of Koreans into Manchuria, which for a time was slightly less oppressed by the Japanese. In some parts of eastern Manchuria, Koreans outnumbered Chinese four to one. Kim's family moved there in 1920, when he was seven. That same year Japan sent troops to eastern Manchuria to root out Korean nationalist fighters. The Japanese killed about thirty-six hundred of them but in the process enraged the half a million Koreans who had settled there. Manchuria became a fertile recruiting ground for the Chinese Communist Party.

Kim was fourteen when his father died. Three years later, he was expelled from middle school and sent to jail for nine months for joining a Communist youth group. After a long cold winter behind bars, he changed his name to Kim Il Sung and never returned to school. He had been radicalized. When Japan launched an all-out military conquest of

Manchuria in 1931, he joined the Moscow-backed Chinese Communist Party.

This is when his transcendent genius as a revolutionary theorist and military leader kicked in, according to his memoirs and the official history of North Korea. He created the Korean People's Army, taught Marxism to Korean children, and seized supreme command of an anti-Japanese war based in eastern Manchuria. 'I believed that revolution in my country would emerge victorious only when it was undertaken on our own responsibility and by the efforts of our own people, and all the problems arising in the revolution must be solved independently and creatively,' Kim wrote in his memoirs.

Yet it was all fiction. There never was a Korean People's Army in Manchuria. As a child expelled from middle school, Kim had not read Marx (which was unavailable to him in Chinese or Korean), and he almost certainly did not understand Marxism well enough to teach it to anyone. He fought the Japanese in Manchuria as a member of a Chinese insurgency. He was almost always under Chinese command. There was no separate group of Korean Communist partisans for him to join. Kim did not work independently to foment revolution.

The untruths were the work of Kim Il Sung and his legion of hagiographers, blowing self-serving smoke back through time. A vast tapestry of these state-sanctioned lies and distortions has obscured and diminished Kim's real achievements, according to his most respected biographer, the historian Dae-Sook Suh, whose careful sifting of evidence found that Kim's military exploits in Manchuria were impressive, particularly for someone so young.

'It is his persistence and obstinate will, characteristic of many successful revolutionaries, that deserve recognition,' Suh writes. 'What is most damaging to his record is his exaggerated claims.'

## II

In 1937, while Kim Il Sung was killing Japanese policemen and becoming a legend, No Kum Sok was a chubby-cheeked five-year-old riding a

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tricycle imported from Japan. A photograph taken that year shows him sitting on the tricycle wearing a thick wool coat with shiny buttons, a Japanese-style cap, short trousers, kneesocks, and white shoes.

He was 'upper-class', especially when compared with most Koreans living under the thumb of imperial Japan. Decades of colonial rule had transformed the peninsula into a well-run, rapidly industrializing, but profoundly inequitable police state. Four out of five Koreans held menial and unskilled jobs, mostly on tenant farms. Food production increased sharply in Korea under colonial occupation, but the availability of food in local markets did not. Most of it was shipped to Japan. The daily lives of twenty-four million Koreans were dominated by fewer than a million Japanese settlers, nearly all of whom made a comfortable living from white-collar jobs, managing factories, and running the colonial government. Most Japanese lived in well-lit urban neighbourhoods. They had electricity, gas, drinkable tap water, and underground sewers; most Koreans had none of these services. In their homes, Japanese women relied on poorly paid Korean servants to clean and cook. On buses, the Japanese forced Koreans to give up their seats and routinely shouted racist insults at them in shops.

Japan tightened its colonial vice even more in 1937 as it went to war in southern China and began to milk its empire for raw materials, soldiers, prostitutes, and slave labour. The Japanese moved with particular ferocity in Korea, squeezing the national identity out of its subjects and trying to replace it with a 'profound gratitude for the limitless benevolence of our Emperor'. Shifting into what historians have characterized as 'colonial totalitarianism', Japan attempted to 'blot out an entire culture'.

In the run-up to World War II, Koreans were forced to give up their language, their literature, their religious shrines, even their names. Schoolchildren were punished if caught speaking Korean at home. As part of their 'imperialization', hundreds of thousands of Korean men were conscripted as slave labour, and thousands of others were forced to 'volunteer' to fight in Japan's overstretched military. Tens of thousands

of Korean women were compelled to work as ‘comfort girls’, servicing the sexual needs of Japan’s military.

Along with cultural extermination, Japan’s colonial policies in Korea insisted on growth and profits – for Japanese investors. To that end, imperial Japan exported heavy industry and state-of-the-art infrastructure to the peninsula, encouraging Japanese conglomerates to take advantage of cheap land, abundant mineral resources, and eager-to-please colonial officials. They built steel mills, chemical factories, fertilizer plants, and several large hydroelectric dams. To connect their plants to ports and to one another, the companies built the most developed network of railways in Asia outside Japan. As a result, Korea entered the 1940s with the best-managed network of railways, roads, and ports in the developing world.

No Kum Sok was chubby because his father had a managerial job with the Noguchi Corporation. The Japanese conglomerate built most of Korea’s hydroelectric and chemical plants and linked them by rail.

The company was created and run by Jun Noguchi, a chemical engineer turned mogul. He was known as the ‘Entrepreneurial King of the Peninsula’, and one of his admirers wrote that while ‘modern America was created by Columbus’s discovery . . . modern Korea was created by Noguchi’. His extraordinary success in Korea, however, owed as much to colonial manipulation as to capitalist acumen. He used the colonial government to obtain development rights to Korea’s major rivers, where he built hydroelectric dams that powered his chemical plants. By 1942, Noguchi’s company controlled a quarter of all the capital invested in Korea.

As much as Japanese companies discriminated against Koreans, they also needed local managers who could keep the trains of empire running on time. No’s father, No Zae Hiub, did exactly that, managing rail lines that delivered construction materials to hydro plants. He found the job through a relative of his young wife, but he qualified for it because he had disciplined himself to have all the skills the Japanese wanted in a Korean.

No Zae Hiub was born in 1904, the year Japanese gunboats chased Russian ships from Korean ports. He came of age as colonial control

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tightened, winning awards at school for penmanship and calligraphy, skills highly valued in Japan. Alone among five brothers and two sisters in a poor family, he graduated from a middle school run by foreign missionaries. The Youngsang Middle School was founded by Presbyterians from Canada and was similar to the missionary school in Pyongyang that Kim Il Sung's father attended.

His teachers and his books made No Zae Hiub pro-Japanese and pro-American. So did baseball. He was the standout pitcher at middle school and, after going to work for Noguchi, played into his thirties as an all-star pitcher for a city league team. In a photograph, No Kum Sok, age three and wearing a pith helmet, sits on a blanket with his father, who is wearing his city league uniform and cap.

An American missionary introduced baseball to Korea, but it was Japan that rammed the game down Korea's throat. Baseball blossomed in Korean schools in the 1930s and 1940s as courses in Korean history, language, and literature disappeared. The highly structured, drill-focused Japanese way of playing baseball weaned young people from Korean traditions and prepared them for a regimented adult life under tyrannical colonial coaching.

No Zae Hiub embraced baseball and accepted Japanese rule as an inescapable fact of life. He bought his son a baseball glove and taught him to speak Japanese. In their house, he required No Kum Sok to speak Japanese a third of the time. If the boy mastered the language and excelled at school, his father told him, he could attend a top university in Tokyo and become 'a real Japanese'.

The Noguchi Corporation treated No Kum Sok's father well and transferred him often. The boy lived in ten cities and towns throughout northern Korea before the age of seventeen. The company typically housed the family in a four-room bungalow with free electricity and easy access to subsidized luxuries in the company store. As an only child (an older sister died soon after his birth), No always had his own room, and his father made certain he had a desk for his studies, a radio, and a tall bookcase. The boy grew up with treats and possessions other Korean kids could only dream about – walnuts and coloured pencils, toy airplanes

and a live turtle, a phonograph, and more than a hundred Japanese and Korean vinyl records. His mother owned an American-made Singer sewing machine, a treasure none of the other Korean mothers had.

No's father greeted him every morning by saying 'Good morning', and required the boy to respond with the same English words. Several of the Japanese books he bought for his son described the wonders of American life: affordable cars, big houses, abundant food, and large universities. Because No was drilled in Japanese at home, he spoke the language fluently when entering his first year at primary school. It was a crucial competitive advantage over other children, especially after 1940, when colonial authorities insisted on Japanese-only schooling. That year all Koreans were ordered to change their names to Japanese. No's name was Okamura Kyoshi, and he answered to it until 1945, when the Russians marched into Korea.

No's father believed Japan would win World War II – and so did his son, whose teachers told him that the emperor Hirohito was a living god. They explained to the boy that Korea did not actually exist; it was a part of Japan, and so was he. By 1944, when he was twelve and in his last year of elementary school, the brainwashing was complete. The boy previously known as No Kum Sok desperately wanted to help the Japanese fight back against the massive American fleet that was transporting marines and soldiers to attack Saipan in the Pacific. Tokyo advertised in Korea for young aviation cadets willing to serve their emperor and prove their patriotism by dying as kamikaze pilots.

No needed his father's permission before he could formally volunteer. The boy found him at home, sitting on a cushion in the living room. No asked his question while standing close to his father, expecting to be praised for bravery and love of Japan. But the moment his father understood the request, he erupted.

'You want to dive into an American warship?' he shouted. 'Are you crazy?'

Smarting from embarrassment, the boy understood for the first time that there were limits to his father's embrace of Japan: he was a Korean pragmatist, not a Japanese patriot. The emperor was not worth dying for.



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The boy's suicidal aspirations melted away. So did his conviction that Japan would win the war.



The Japanese put a bounty on Kim Il Sung's head, dispatched a posse to kill him, and made him the most wanted partisan leader in Manchuria. But they never caught up with him.

It was the Chinese Communists who nearly did him in. They arrested Kim as part of a witch hunt that went after ethnic Koreans in Manchuria. Although Kim survived, at least a thousand Korean partisan fighters and Korean civilians were tortured and killed in the 1930s on baseless charges that they collaborated with the Japanese colonial police. Chinese Communists killed Koreans for spilling rice while eating, sighing in public, or fleeing a Japanese prison rather than staying put for execution.

This obscure racist purge on the eastern fringes of Manchuria – called the Minsaengdan incident – nearly destroyed the common struggle of Chinese and Korean Communists against Japan. More enduringly, it seared paranoia into Kim's character. As a guerrilla leader and later as a dictator, he never forgot and rarely forgave anyone who crossed him. The tense relationship that North Korea has today with China – a mix of dependence and suspicion, cooperation and contempt – can be traced back to the rage that he felt as Chinese Communists tortured and killed his Korean comrades. Kim called it a 'mad wind . . . [Koreans] were being slaughtered indiscriminately by [Chinese] with whom they had shared bread and board only yesterday.'

The Minsaengdan (People's Livelihood Corps) was a small militia created by the Japanese police, supposedly to protect Korean civilians from bandits in eastern Manchuria. But Chinese partisans saw it as part of a massive Japanese effort to use Korean spies to destroy the Communist movement. For two and a half years, Chinese partisan leaders operated on the assumption that Koreans in eastern Manchuria were pro-Japanese. Because Koreans (including the parents of Kim Il Sung and

hundreds of thousands of exiles from the Korean Peninsula) were in the majority in the region, there were a great many people to arrest, interrogate, torture, and kill.

The purge killed or scared off nearly all the senior guerrilla commanders in eastern Manchuria who were ethnic Korean. After his arrest in 1934, Kim escaped execution because he spoke Chinese well and had important friends in the Chinese Communist command. He was also perceived as being too young, at age twenty-two, to be a spy for the Japanese.

In his memoirs, Kim says that he confronted the Chinese Communists at a party meeting and persuaded them to end the purge.

‘Comrades, stop gambling on people’s destinies,’ he claims he told the Chinese. ‘The only way to redress the murder of thousands of martyrs on a false charge of involvement in the Minsaengdan is to stop this pointless murder and concentrate all our efforts on the struggle against the Japanese.’

There is a dispute among scholars about whether Kim even attended that meeting. But historians agree that it was in the mid-1930s, as the Chinese Communists realized the purge was crippling their fight against the Japanese, that Kim became the pre-eminent Korean guerrilla leader. He seems to have been the last Korean leader left standing.

Kim then put together a new guerrilla unit, consisting of ethnic Koreans who had been arrested and held as traitors. At a Chinese guerrilla outpost called Mount Mann, he freed a hundred of them and burned their criminal files. ‘When the bundles of papers turned into flames, the men and women [who had been under suspicion for years] burst into tears. They understood me,’ Kim wrote.

By saving these fighters, Kim created a core of followers who would serve him for the rest of their lives – and help him create and manage North Korea. The Minsaengdan suspects – and twenty orphaned Korean children rescued at Mount Mann – came to see Kim as a ‘parental leader’. They joined him to fight the Japanese in Manchuria and later followed him to North Korea, where they helped him run the country.

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Four of the rescued orphans grew up to become directors of a North Korean school that taught generations of the North Korean elite how to worship the Great Leader and do his bidding.

After 1934, the anti-Japanese war in Manchuria gathered momentum. Working again with the Chinese, Kim led raids that secured his notoriety. In addition to the raid on Pochonbo, Kim's men famously lured a Japanese expeditionary force up a snow-covered hill, where other guerrillas were camouflaged beneath white cloth. They reportedly killed or captured twenty-seven Japanese officers and soldiers.

The movement was built on 'love and trust and unity', Kim claims in his memoirs. A spy for the Japanese, a woman named Chi Sun Ok who spent nearly a year with Kim and his fighters, reported that Kim was indeed an idealistic leader who, between attacks and retreats, preached endlessly to his men about international Communism and Korean nationalism.

But in the freezing Manchurian hinterlands, love and ideology did little to provision Kim's guerrillas. To feed and clothe them, he extorted protection money out of opium and ginseng farmers. He terrorized Chinese and Korean landowners, using blackmail, hostages, and murder. His men stormed into villages, press-ganged young men into service as soldiers, and demanded ransoms.

'If you do not bring [money, food, and clothing] by tomorrow noon,' said one note delivered to a Manchurian village, 'we will cut off ears of one of the kidnapped and will return him to your families, and if you do not comply within three days, we will cut off heads of the kidnapped and return them to you.'

In Kim's politics, as in his daily struggles to find food, there was never a question of whether the ends justified the means. He had become a thug with a cause. But thuggery was not nearly enough. In Manchuria, the Japanese had too many troops and too much firepower. Few of the young men Kim forced to become fighters believed his lectures about Communist revolution or a Korea that would one day be free. Many deserted at the first opportunity. By the late 1930s, the guerrilla war was

lost. Kim fled into the far east of the Soviet Union, seeking sanctuary near Vladivostok, where he was immediately arrested.

## **IV**

When World War II ended, so did the cosseted childhood of No Kum Sok. In August 1945, Americans dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan surrendered, and Russian soldiers stormed into the newly invented North Korea.

No was thirteen and living with his parents in a Noguchi Corporation bungalow in Kanggye, a city near the Chinese border, as units of the Soviet Union's Twenty-fifth Army rolled in on trucks. They were a mob, often without uniforms, shoes, food rations, or respect for commanding officers. They had been conscripted into a Soviet army decimated by war in Europe. Many regarded Koreans as racially inferior conquered enemies. As the Japanese quickly surrendered or fled south, the young Russians, many of them illiterate sons of peasant farmers, settled in for several delirious weeks of pillaging, raping, and drinking.

No watched them loot stores in Kanggye, where they seemed to take a particular interest in wristwatches. Soldiers wore several on each arm, rarely bothering to set or wind them. They were crazy for anything alcoholic. No saw them drink antifreeze and vomit in the streets. He heard stories from his neighbours about Russians bursting into houses, where they raped mothers and daughters in front of their families. This became a routine practice across northern Korea. Terrorized women began dressing as men to escape assault in the streets. Soviet troops were sometimes disciplined for rape, via a firing squad, but it was relatively rare. Industrial-scale looting began, with soldiers loading timber, grain, machinery, and fertilizer on trains for transport back to the Soviet Union. Within two blocks of No's house, Russian troops set up one of these large operations inside a Japanese military depot with a dozen two-storey, redbrick buildings stocked with boots, uniforms, medicines, rice, and underwear.

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After the Russians arrived, No's family did not have enough money for food. They stopped eating meat. His father was still expected to manage the railways, but he was barely paid. The Noguchi company store had been cleaned out. The Russians cut phone and mail service with Noguchi headquarters in Seoul, which was south of the thirty-eighth parallel in a new and suddenly foreign country ruled by the US military. To eat, No's parents sold many of the possessions that had made the family upper-class: the Singer sewing machine, the phonograph, and all the records.

His parents warned him to stay clear of the Russians. But No spied on them as they swarmed around the Japanese military depot, noticing their eagerness to trade nearly anything for drink. They seemed to especially like *sool*, a Korean spirit made from rice. No's father kept a large bottle of it in the house. One morning, No poured some into a small bottle and brought it to the depot as a friendship offering for the Russians. The guard at the gate was dubious. He pushed the bottle to No's lips, forcing him to take a drink. Satisfied it was not poison, he escorted the boy to an inner courtyard, where No saw a dozen Russian sergeants sitting around a table, eating boiled chicken and black bread. They were delighted with the gift of rice spirits and returned the favour by giving the boy two pairs of Japanese leather boots, each pair worth a month's wages.

While No was inside the depot, he noticed that local Koreans were loading Soviet trucks with boots and other goods. He asked one of them how he had gotten the job. Line up before sunrise, he was told. The next morning, No was there, the youngest and smallest kid in line. He flexed his biceps for amused Russians and was among twenty Koreans chosen to help them steal Japanese goods. His pay was extraordinarily generous. For a day's work, the Russians gave No two more pairs of boots, a hundred pounds of rice, and a dozen pairs of socks. He and the other Koreans also helped themselves to all the underwear they could hide beneath their clothes and still manage to walk. The boy shuffled home wearing five undershirts and five pairs of undershorts. An unexpected bonus was lunch, No's first chance to eat Russian-style: butter, cheese, and salami. The next morning, he was back in line and again scored a big bag of rice

and several years' worth of boots and underwear. On the third day, as word spread about the benefits of helping the Russians, the line of job applicants started forming at midnight. There was a near riot. Teenagers tried to climb the depot's wall. One of No's neighbours was shot in the leg and crippled.

By October 1945, lawlessness in Kanggye and the rest of northern Korea had been brought under control after Stalin himself ordered the commander of Soviet occupation forces to 'strictly observe discipline, not offend the population, and conduct themselves properly'. That order came too late to alter the views of No's parents, who saw the Russians as 'barbarians' whose arrival had wrecked their lives. In the next two years, about two million Koreans abandoned their homes and possessions, heading south to the American zone, sometimes on foot, to escape Soviet occupation.

Worried about his pension, No's father risked a journey to Seoul. With half a dozen colleagues from his company, he travelled by train to the last station north of the thirty-eighth parallel and hired a guide to lead them south. In Seoul, the office of the Korean branch of Noguchi was empty. There would be no pension. No's father wandered around Seoul and, as he later told his son, was impressed by the American soldiers in the streets. They were clean, smartly dressed, and well behaved, especially in comparison to the Russians back in Kanggye. He bought his son an American-made toothbrush and a poster of South Korea's new leader, Syngman Rhee.

No's father liked what he saw in South Korea, but he was afraid to move his family there. He still had a company-provided house and a railway job. He doubted he could find a job or a place to live in the South and worried that his family would go hungry in the South's chaotic, strike-crippled economy.

So they stayed on in Kanggye, where No attended middle school and, following his father's lead, became known as the most pro-American kid in his class. For a while, the Russians tolerated some freedom of expression in the school, in part because few teachers were trained in a Communist curriculum. No earned an A in English and latched onto his

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Japanese-trained English teacher, who coached soccer and was vocally anti-Communist. The teacher was later fired and fled to South Korea, where he served in the army.

School soon began to change. No was required to join the Korean Democratic Youth League, a Communist group. Teachers tried to stamp out religion, requiring No to repeat, 'There is no God, no mystery, no secrets of life. Everyone can know everything'. In a political science course called 'People', No's teacher said the United States was a poor country.

While the boy could accept that religion was a sham, he simply did not believe that America was poor. On that subject, he had authoritative counter-information. Picture books that he had committed to memory showed a California couple taking a Sunday-afternoon drive in a big automobile as their dog poked its nose out the car window and lapped at the cool breeze. The dog lived better than he did. Another book described a Japanese stowaway who jumped off a ship in America and became rich. In Kanggye, No had seen the houses of American missionaries. They were large and luxurious and had flush toilets, a rarity in Korea. No believed that the United States was paradise and his new teachers were liars. At thirteen, he began to dream about stealing away to America.

