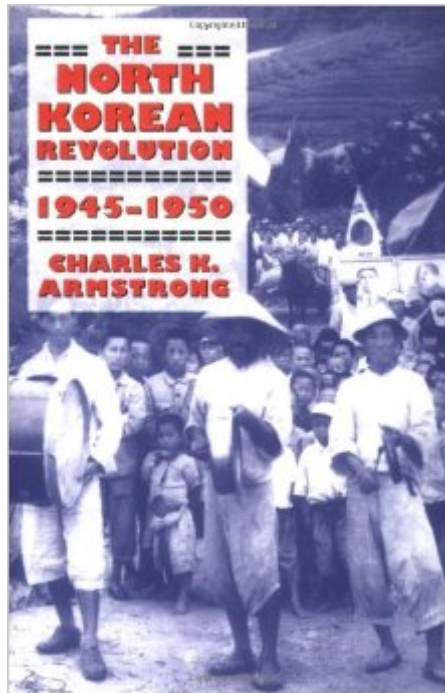


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The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950 (Studies Of The Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University)



Synopsis

North Korea, despite a shattered economy and a populace suffering from widespread hunger, has outlived repeated forecasts of its imminent demise. Charles K. Armstrong contends that a major source of North Korea's strength and resiliency, as well as of its flaws and shortcomings, lies in the poorly understood origins of its system of government. He examines the genesis of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) both as an important yet rarely studied example of a communist state and as part of modern Korean history. North Korea is one of the last redoubts of "unreformed" Marxism-Leninism in the world. Yet it is not a Soviet satellite in the East European manner, nor is its government the result of a local revolution, as in Cuba and Vietnam. Instead, the DPRK represents a unique "indigenization" of Soviet Stalinism, Armstrong finds. The system that formed under the umbrella of the Soviet occupation quickly developed into a nationalist regime as programs initiated from above merged with distinctive local conditions. Armstrong's account is based on long-classified documents captured by U.S. forces during the Korean War. This enormous archive of over 1.6 million pages provides unprecedented insight into the making of the Pyongyang regime and fuels the author's argument that the North Korean state is likely to remain viable for some years to come.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In *The North Korean Revolution 1945-1950*, Charles K. Armstrong argues that North Korea was not simply the result of an externally imposed communist system strictly controlled by the Soviet Union -

and that Kim Il Sung was not a hand-picked Soviet puppet. Instead, he argues that North Korea, though created under the umbrella of the occupying Soviets, developed a uniquely Korean form of communism forged from the experiences of the various Korean communist groups that returned or re-emerged after liberation. Throughout the book, Armstrong strives to demonstrate the uniquely indigenous Korean aspects of the social formation of North Korea into a communist state - particularly those that contrast the Soviet national model and the type of socialism imposed more strongly on the Eastern European states. Armstrong begins his argument by discussing how socialist endeavors at land reform in Manchuria amongst the large populations of ethnic Koreans directly influenced subsequent land reforms in North Korea after Soviet occupation. Armstrong uses this one example to illustrate that an indigenous communist movement not only existed in theory in colonial Korea, but also actually put their theories into practice amongst the ethnic Korean population of Manchuria. Armstrong also notes that this nascent Korean communist movement, that existed to a limited extent within Korea and also in other countries where Koreans emigrated to or fled, was neither created nor controlled by the Soviet Union. In fact, when Soviet forces occupied North Korea, they had no known communist groups with which they had contact.

Completely by coincidence, I finished this book one day after the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950. It is an appropriate coincidence, however, since Armstrong (who completed the first version of this study as his dissertation under Bruce Cumings at the University of Chicago) lays out the development of North Korea as an increasingly separate state and society right up to the eve of the war. In Armstrong's description, "Korea's sudden liberation from Japanese colonialism in 1945 created an enormous space for politics, releasing a cacophony of contesting voices claiming to represent Korean society" (p. 47). Armstrong traces the early development of several of those voices, eventually narrowing his focus to Kim Il Sung and the people surrounding him--primarily allies from his days as an anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter in Manchuria. Indeed, one of Armstrong's purposes is to demonstrate that the experience of living and fighting in exile in the hinterlands of China had far more to do with shaping Kim's thinking and politics than any adherence to a Soviet-inspired system. He convincingly demonstrates that the development of North Korean politics, society, economy, and culture in these five crucial years immediately after Liberation were a combination of the legacy of colonial rule, influence from the USSR and China, and a bedrock of enduring Korean culture. Especially valuable is Armstrong's extensive use of North Korean documents captured by US forces during the Korean War--an enormous archive which scholars have only begun to mine. Armstrong concludes that Kim Il Sung gained power not because he was

anointed by the Soviet Union but because he skillfully manipulated internal political alignments and understood the strength of Korean nationalism.

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