

Juche Food

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He was not yet the Great Leader, but he was hoping that handouts of ammonium sulphate would do it. The crushed white fertilizer was a luxury. Everything was back then. The rally was new though. Perched metres above his audience, standing on the gift – compacted into a brick-like solid for this purpose – stood a short, stout man, dressed as a Chinese stooge in a replica Mao suit. People would later describe him as being a giant of a human being, imposing himself over the adoring crowds. He was 5 foot 7 inches, they were forced to be there and forced to adore him... some didn't know who he was, but they understood the guns at their backs.

Despite his monochromatic grey jumpsuit, Kim Il Sung was not a Chinese puppet... he was a Soviet puppet. From Manchuria, Kim had fought a guerrilla insurgency against the Japanese during the Second World War. This was the image he was building himself on. But the Japanese had crushed his group – without any real interruption – in the early days of the fighting.

He had been trained by the Soviet Union, armed by the Soviet Union, and then sheltered through the war by the Soviet Union; and – along with America – the Soviet Union had liberated his homeland without him. Now in his mid-thirties, and due to the sheer good fortune of being personally liked by a close advisor to Stalin, he was being hoisted into power, once again, on the backs of his Soviet masters.

The purges had not yet begun... they would soon. Initially, Kim would have to build himself, his authority, and his cult, predominantly through success, and not fear. The country's wealth had been nationalised, business owners sent for re-education, and the land redistributed into village collectives; the state would provide everything now. And they needed fertilizer.

Living under Japanese rule, the Korean peninsula was divided on natural, geographic lines. The north – rich in untapped minable resources, and located at the gateway to China and the Soviet Union – was curated into an industrial playland for outsourced Japanese manufacturing. The South – better suited to food production – was simply tasked with feeding the rest of the country.

So when Stalin and Truman accepted separate controls for Korea, with Soviet and American forces pausing to face each other across the 38th parallel, they did so expecting it would be temporary. Korea had not been divided since the late Goryeo Empire united the three Kingdoms in the 10th century. Now balkanized by geographic chance, and Japanese pragmatism, the two Koreas needed each other more than ever. In the meantime, Kim Il Sung would diversify, handing out fertilizer and undertaking extensive irrigation initiatives to do something he had not yet articulated, something that would run in the face of his communist elder brothers. He wanted self-reliance.

Kim needed to either rapidly develop his farming sector, or rapidly reunify the peninsula. Failing this, he would be forever knocking on the doors of foreign powers, hat in hand, pleading for food aid. In 1950,

convinced that American forces would abandon the country if things became uncomfortable, and after begging the Soviet Union for support, Kim invaded the South.

Early successes saw Northern troops flood across the peninsula, with the southern port city of Busan the only holdout against a *blitzkrieg* victory. But the Americans didn't wilt as expected. And with much of the same military command in place that had authorised the carpet bombing of Japan, they reflexively began napalming Northern cities.

If Douglas MacArthur – as the General in charge of the war – had his way, most of this bombing would have been done with nuclear weapons (the Truman administration blocked multiple requests for authorisation). After three years, and four million dead, the armistice line was drawn, once again, on the 38th parallel; more-or-less in the exact same position as before the war. Kim Il Sung's easy fix to food self-reliance had failed, and now the country around him was unrecognisable, with 80 percent of the infrastructure razed to the ground.

For the time being, South Korea would suffer through turmoil: American control – military rule – *coup d'état* – authoritarianism – assassination – political uprising. And the North Korean propaganda machine could talk endlessly of the cruel starvation of their Southern family, without too much embellishment. But the comparison wouldn't last long, capitalism in the South would catch fire, information would be hard to block out, and North Koreans would soon have to tackle with the knowledge that they were falling behind.

After the Korean War, Kim Il Sung gave a speech to an audience in Pyongyang, and introduced the new animating idea of his nation. Something that would explain away the suffering that was building inside the communist paradise, and also, progressively, do away with communism altogether. "*The sole guiding idea of the Government of the Republic. Juche, independence, self-reliance and self-defence are the guiding principles of our revolution*".

Juche – or national self-reliance – put Korean communism in its grave. And the regime weren't shy about it, castigating the member states of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) – a multilateral trading bloc set up by Stalin to strengthen the internationalist bent of communism – for weakening themselves through co-operation. Laughable at the time, all those member states have since watched their regimes break-up and collapse, whilst North Korea have, painstakingly, continued.

South Koreans were well-fed and increasingly wealthy, but they were also humiliated, and stripped of their unique Korean identity as they played the role of beggar to the Americans – or so the new propaganda read. North Koreans still had their pride, and their Southern countrymen – if not too brainwashed by their American captors – were hoping for a fresh invasion from the North, and reunification under the Kim dynasty, and *Juche* philosophy.

In the interim, self-reliance needed to become self-reliant – and agriculture has always been a challenge in North Korea. Beyond the lack of historical development, the cold, predominantly mountain terrain left very little space for productive farming land. For *Juche* this wouldn't do. Problems need to be overcome – and Koreans should rise above nature itself. This was the reason for the fertilizer, as well as the construction of terraced fields, and the development of a national irrigation system operating on electric pumps, to replace the traditional wooden swings. What wasn't productive, would be made so... through the vision of the Great Leader.

To celebrate Kim's 80th birthday, a monument was built in the Myohyang Mountains. Carved in metre-deep writing on the side was the inscription: "*The irrigation-based socialist agriculture of our country will have a great harvest every year. Kim Il Sung, April 15, 1992*". The irony would soon be felt.

A year earlier the Soviet Union had collapsed, and North Korea was no longer able to import its chemical fertilizer at the discounted rates that they had always enjoyed. Most farms had to – for the first time – start growing their crops unassisted, in the harsh, natural soil. Most failed. Following this, an energy crisis meant that the irrigation system couldn't be maintained, and water intensive harvests, such as rice, collapsed as well. And then, with little disaster planning in place, mass flooding meant that the terraced fields were first inundated, and subsequently swept away.

This all cleaved together in 1994. The same year that the Great Leader died, the Great Famine started. His son, Kim Jong Il was inheriting an existential disaster. With none of the charisma of his father, the starvation would be blamed on him; and in a final insult, the leadership of North Korea was taken to the grave along with his father, with Kim Il Sung posthumously declared 'Eternal President'. Kim Jong Il would have to settle for 'Head of the Military'. But in this, he had a way to defuse the bomb handed down to him.

Reaching back to earlier statements by his father, the new leader announced the immediate militarisation of the country. *Songun* – or 'military first' – would involve the political training of existing soldiers, the fortification of the country against external attack, the arming of all citizenry, and the modernisation of all military equipment. This last provision would include a renewed commitment to a nuclear weapons program.

As the North Korean famine – or 'Arduous March' – rolled over the country, and as people were being encouraged to embrace their struggle through the slogan, "*Let's eat only two meals a day*" (Soon it would be only one), it was all being sold not as mismanagement or a natural disaster, but as a backs-to-the-wall response to an aggressive enemy. An enemy that, if unchecked by a costly military build-up, would soon be, once again, carpet bombing from the skies and invading from the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ). Painted as the vengeful enemy, America were taken aback – up until that point, and remaining so throughout the famine years, they were the largest contributor of food aid to the North Korean state.

Crossing the Yalu River into China, a record number of North Koreans defected at this time. For those who stayed, the famine ended only after enough people had died; meaning there was finally enough food to go around. Today, under a third generation of the Kim dynasty (Kim Jong Un), North Koreans are no longer starving... they are only malnourished. This is not an insignificant improvement.

In the centre of Pyongyang, as a monument to the Great Leader, Kim Il Sung, stands the Juche Tower – a 150 metre high red flame, reaching into the sky. But, as it now hangs gangrenously from its *Songun* host, *Juche*, as an ideology, is dead! And just as with the communist insignia before it, the tower will likely be removed at some future date, in the dead of night, never to be spoken of again. Now all the talk is of 'military first' – of leering enemies, looming conflicts, missile launches, nuclear tests, and threats of war. And it has to be. It is the last thing that justifies the lingering scarcity, the daily suffering, and the memory of the famine – it is the only thing keeping the regime alive.