

book reviews

STALINIZATION THE KIM WAY

*Kim Il Sung in the
Khrushchev Era:
Soviet-DPRK Relations and
the Roots of North Korean
Despotism, 1953-1964*

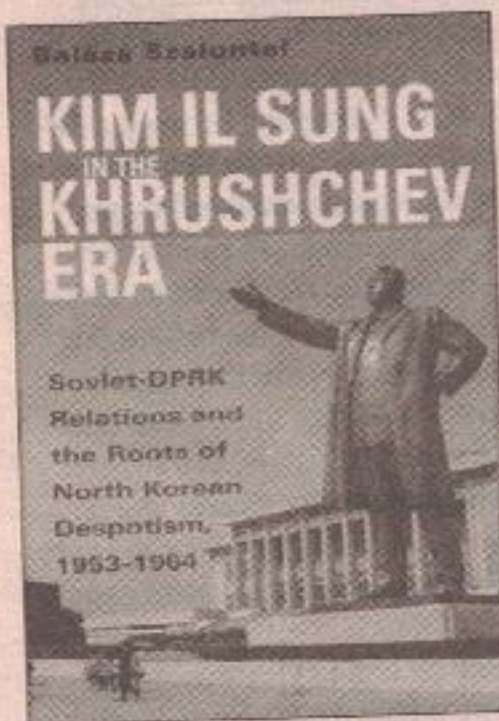
By Balazs Szalontai
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Review by John Feffer

All countries are unique. But, to indulge in a bit of illogical playfulness, some countries are more unique than others. North Korea is just such a place. Walking around Pyongyang can feel like an excursion to Ceausescu's Bucharest or to 19th-century Choson Korea. Ultimately, however, there's no place on earth like it.

Historians are divided on the question of how North Korea came to be the way it is. One faction sees the handiwork of the Soviet Union: North Korea is just one of the more far-flung pollinations of Stalin. The other faction looks at Korean history and finds traces of feudalism, Confucianism, and Japanese colonialism.

In his new book, Hungarian political scientist Balazs Szalontai borrows liberally from both these traditions. He is well positioned to synthesize the two approaches. Fluent in Korean, he has carefully studied all that is available on the North Korean side (which, admittedly, is sparse since no outsiders have had access to Pyongyang's archives). Fluent in Russian and Hungarian, Szalontai has scrutinized recently available materials in the Hungarian archives, a rich trove of diplomatic observations from the alternately sympathetic and skeptical East Europeans who spent time among their erstwhile comrades.



own oversized likeness and a principal university that bore his name as early as 1946, more closely resembled Stalin's influence than anything in the Confucian or feudal tradition.

Ironically, it was Kim's admiration for Stalinism (despite certain suspicions about Stalin himself) that would eventually distinguish North Korea from the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe. Stalin emphasized "socialism in one country," which ultimately fused communism with nationalism at the expense of internationalism. Kim took this lesson to heart more than Stalin would have liked. From early on, the North Korean system valued national traditions as a way to strengthen popular support for the regime.

So, for instance, Szalontai relates how East European diplomats were outraged at such "backward customs" as North Korean women carrying baskets on their heads or children on their backs. Young soldiers who signed up to fight in the early days of the Korean War signed their names with their own blood, an old Confucian tradition. Foreign words, primarily Japanese, were purged from North Korean dictionaries.

The gap between the Soviet bloc and North Korea widened, despite North Korea's continued reliance on the Soviet Union for aid and trade. The differences, as described candidly in the Hungarian archives, make for tragicomic reading. On the tragic side, one document describes a North Korean dissident who crashed the Bulgarian embassy in 1960 to itemize the "mistakes" of the Korean Workers Party leadership. The embassy translator snitched to North Korean security forces who came and arrested him. And that was the end of dissidents trying to seek help from the East European embassies.

If Kafka is your idea of funny, then you might find the following anecdote amusing. "In September 1964," Szalontai writes, "a Hungarian diplomat discussed some issues over the phone with a Polish colleague. A few minutes after he had replaced the receiver, he was phoned by an unknown Korean who called upon him to tell what the conversation had been about, 'for I did not understand completely what you said in Russian.'"

Szalontai, fortunately, is not content to compare and contrast North Korea with the Soviet Union or even just the East European satellites. His comparative approach is impressively global. He delves into Vietnamese history to understand how and why the histories of the two divided countries diverged in the post-World War II era. He assesses the illiberal nature of the South Korean authoritarian regimes to understand if certain political factors were uniquely Korean. In a virtuoso concluding note, he wonders whether Jong Il Kim, the son of a more charismatic father, will follow similarly overshadowed filial successors: Jiang Jinguo toward a Taiwan-style reform or Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier toward Haitian-style immiseration.

to provide the repatriates, who were not required to pay for their housing and electricity, with comfortable apartments.

"In addition, in the cities the repatriates did not pay public transportation fares." Later, these resentments boiled over and became ammunition for informers. In this way, the North Korean population willingly collaborated in the regime of surveillance and repression.

Szalontai's description of factional struggles, meanwhile, is superb, particularly his analysis of the dog that didn't bark, namely the "Moscow group" that played such a major role in East European developments but was largely absent from North Korean politics. This close reading of North Korean infighting leads him to an interesting conclusion: "It was the long and persistent tradition of sharp intra-elite conflicts, rather than a tradition of absolute tyranny, that one should blame for the gradual establishment of North Korean despotism." Don't blame Stalin or Confucius; it was the peculiar minority status that Kim Il Sung and his fellow guerrilla partisans suffered under in those early years that bred a ferocious will to power.

It is often said that North Korea is an "information black hole." Balazs Szalontai proves that through a careful sifting of available information, a strong comparative approach across cultures and time periods, and a little creative triangulation, a great deal can be known about the country. If someday a lottery is held to choose the first outside scholar allowed to visit North Korea's archives, my vote goes to him.

From this vantage point, Szalontai plays a fascinating game of compare and contrast between North Korea and the Soviet Union. On the comparison side, he notes that the Soviet Union played a significant role in North Korea's early development. Between 1946 and 1948, the Soviet Union virtually single-handedly restored North Korea's economic capacity, purchasing and supplying more than 90 percent of both exports and imports. Founder Il Sung Kim's personality cult, with statues of his

Kim's nationalism translated, after Stalin's death, into a resolve not to follow the new Soviet line and liberalize à la Khrushchev. While de-Stalinization made its way fitfully throughout Eastern Europe in the wake of Khrushchev's secret 1956 address to the 20th Party Congress, North Korea held the line. If anything, as Szalontai relates, the country became more Stalinist in orientation: Purges of liberals in 1956, an increased in "voluntary" work in the later 1950s, a crack-down on all dissent. "The DPRK achieved political independence," Szalontai writes, "at the expense of rejecting political liberalization."

The strength of Szalontai's comparative approach lies not only in his ability to draw on many different traditions and cultures, but his detailed knowledge of North Korea's particulars. For instance, he points out that Il Sung Kim encouraged an influx of Korean-Chinese and Korean-Japanese immigrants to overcome the labor shortage caused by the devastations of the Korean War. This inflow, particularly the Japanese repatriates, caused enormous resentment among the population. As Szalontai notes, "the dictatorship removed a lot of people from their newly built housing in order