

**[International Conference in Honor of the
80th Anniversary of the Liberation of Korea]**

Searching for New Perspectives on Contemporary History of Korea: Rethinking
Decolonization, Military Occupations, and the Ideas for a Democratic Korea


August 4-5 2025 / KCCI, Seoul

[Hosted by Northeast Asian History Foundation,
Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies (SNU), Institute of Social Sciences (SNU)]

Conference Proceeding

1945: The Soviet Army's Rule over North Korea and the Coming of Kim Il-sung

Fyodor TERTITSKI
Korea University



This presentation will focus on a short but highly important period in the history of North Korea, starting with the Soviet-Japanese War of August 1945 and concluding with the provisional appointment of Kim Il-sung as the future leader of the emerging state. The central argument is that North Korea, as we know it, was not a predetermined outcome, but rather emerged due to a series of unlikely events.

After the defeat of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union began preparing to attack Imperial Japan, as agreed with Britain and the United States at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. The war was officially declared on August 8. At this point, Moscow had little to no detailed plans regarding Japan's territories, including Korea, and most decisions were made in an ad-hoc manner. For instance, the decision to divide Korea along the 38th parallel was proposed by the United States on August 10, while a Soviet document from the previous day indicated that the Soviets had initially planned to march directly to Seoul.

The Soviet entry into the war, coupled with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, forced Japan to accept the Allies' conditions and surrender. However, even at this time, the Soviets were still unclear

about their plans for Korea. For example, the decision to make Pyongyang the capital was made by General Chistyakov on August 25, likely influenced by his visit to Hamhung the day before. He was presented with a choice between Hamhung and Pyongyang and chose the latter.

The first month of Soviet rule in Korea was a chaotic one, marked by typical post-war events such as the formation of right-wing parties and even pro-American demonstrations. However, such occurrences soon became unthinkable in the North. Unlike Austria or Germany, no joint administration of Korea was established, and, unlike Austria, no local provisional government was ever recognized by the Soviets or the Americans. The local People's Committees, created by the last orders of the Japanese Government-General to peacefully transfer power to the locals, were viewed with suspicion and distrust by the Soviets. This mistrust played a significant role in ensuring that the provisional institutions for both North and South Korea eventually became permanent.

Starting in September, the Soviets began pursuing a more proactive policy in Korea. They suppressed disloyal parties, and by late September, Stalin issued an order to the Soviet command, instructing them not to "Sovietize" the region but to prepare a provisional government. Notably, this order did not include any instructions to begin talks with the Americans about a unified government, signaling that Moscow was already viewing North Korea as a separate political entity. The local Soviet command was also tasked with finding a leader for the North.

In August 1945, Korea had no Communist Party, and thus no clear leader among the pro-Soviet forces. This created a power vacuum as the Soviets began searching for a suitable candidate. The Soviet generals favored their comrade-in-arms, Captain Kim Il-sung, who had served in the Red Army and spoke fluent Russian. Kim returned to Korea in September, and fate led him to Pyongyang, where the Soviet headquarters were based. His friend and future personal secretary, Mun Il, introduced him to the Soviets. Although other potential candidates were considered, none met the strict criteria set by the Kremlin. According to General Lebedev, the final push in favor of Kim Il-sung came from Lavrentiy Beria, who recommended him to Stalin.

It appears that the decision to promote Kim Il-sung was made in December 1945, when he was appointed Chief Secretary of the North Korean Bureau of the Communist Party. Notably, all of Kim's public appearances, including his famous address on October 14, were orchestrated by the local Soviet command, as evidenced by a December document that referred to Kim as a "popular leader" rather than a man designated by Moscow for ascension to power.

The political changes in North Korea were accompanied by economic changes. In 1945, the region saw a sharp economic decline, exacerbated by its separation from the South, the Japanese mainland, and Manchuria. Documents show that the first Soviet ruler of the North, Ivan Chistyakov, was ineffective in managing the economy, which began to stall, while Soviet soldiers looted without facing any repercussions. Chistyakov's mismanagement was reported by two brave officers, Georgiy Fyodorov and Yuriy Livshits, who risked speaking out. Only in 1946, when General Terentiy Shtykov assumed de facto control of the North, did the USSR begin making significant investments, leading to the start of economic recovery.

The events of 1945 were decisive in shaping North Korea's history, laying the groundwork for both the division of Korea and the rise of Kim Il-sung's regime.

Fyodor TERTITSKIY is a lecturer at Korea University in Seoul. He has authored several books in both English and Korean on North Korean history and military affairs, including *Accidental Tyrant: The Life of Kim Il-sung*, *The Forgotten Political Elites of North Korea: Woe to the Vanquished*, *Soviet-North Korean Relations During the Cold War*, and *The North Korean Army: History, Structure, Daily Life*.