

Kim Il Sung

The North Korean Leader

By Dae-Sook Suh

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By any account Kim Il Sung was an extraordinary figure in twentieth-century history. Not only was the North Korean leader's nearly half century of rule the longest dictatorship in modern history, few autocrats so dominated the nation they governed. Kim directed all aspects of economic, political and cultural life in North Korea, provided it with his personal ideology usually referred to as "*juche* thought," and created a cult of personality without parallel in its excesses. Furthermore, although Kim walled off his people from the outside world, the outside world was not able to wall itself off from him. His ambitions for achieving national unity on his terms resulted in the Korean War, and kept a constant state of tension on the Korean peninsula for four decades after the 1953 cease-fire. Indeed, his North Korean state became the "rogue state" par excellence, a prime argument for proponents of the antiballistic missile system.

Yet despite Kim Il Sung's importance in Korean, Asian and post-1945 world history, there are few reliable, nonpartisan accounts of his life and rule in English. Among those few, Dae-Sook Suh's study, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader*, is the most objective and thoroughly researched. Suh begins with a summary of what is known about his early life and career as an anti-Japanese guerilla fighting in Manchuria near the Korean border. His own propaganda machine later inflated his contributions to the struggle for Korean independence to absurd levels, but Suh avoids the counter-tendency to deny him his real if modest achievements. Suh then describes how he consolidated power under the Soviet occupation of northern Korea and analyzes his reasons for launching the June 1950 invasion of South Korea. The author is especially good at delineating Kim Il Sung's skill at outmaneuvering his domestic rivals and at maintaining ties with both China and the Soviet Union during the Sino-Soviet split.

Suh, a professor of political science at the University of Hawaii, has a clear style that makes the biography readable and accessible to the nonspecialist. This makes the book suitable for undergraduate students and for teachers attempting to learn more about North Korean history. Some background in modern East Asian history, however, would be helpful for readers. One of the virtues of this work is that unlike most of the literature on North Korea, the author has no obvious political agenda. Suh's masterful command of the subject, apparent even to the reader who is unaware of his extensive research on Korean communism, is

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aimed only at trying to understand Kim Il Sung and the society he shaped. The author's judgments are for the most part balanced and reasonable.

The book does have its limitations. *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* is primarily a political history and gives only a few interesting anecdotes concerning his personal life, nor does it tell us much about everyday life in North Korea. It is also somewhat dated. The 1998 paperback edition is unrevised except for a five-page preface that adds little in the way of new information or analysis. Since Kim was successful in passing on his rule to his son and since Pyongyang under Kim Jong Il remains as isolated and secretive as before, there has been no great flood of information that would necessitate a radical revision of the early work. Nonetheless, there has been some recent scholarship that sheds new light on North Korean history. Furthermore, events of recent years—such as the chronic and sometimes horrific famine conditions that prevail in the countryside while the regime conducts lavish celebrations in honor of father and son and tests missiles—cannot help but color our evaluation of Kim Il Sung. While the book helps us to understand Kim's fierce nationalism and his desire for national unity and even to appreciate some of his positive achievements in North Korea, it is less successful in revealing the tyranny he created. Suh is rightly critical of Kim's rigid ideology which "bound his people to him but cut them off from the rest of the world," his ruthless elimination of rivals, and his vanity. But the author is less successful in capturing the magnitude of suffering and horror he brought to all the people of the peninsula. ■

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