Kim Il Sung
The North Korean Leader
By Dae-Sook Suh

443 pages

B

y 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 gov-
erned. 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 inva-
sion 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 non-specialist. 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

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 celebra-
tions 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 achieve-
ments 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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