

# **The Origins of the DPRK: From Division to Reunification**

Roland Boer

2016

The propaganda on which we were raised had it that the Second World War came to an end through the decisive action of the United States in dropping a couple of atomic bombs on Japan. Then, US troops immediately moved to the Korean Peninsula to ensure that the freedom-loving Koreans were not subjected to the totalitarian rule of evil communists. They were not entirely successful, because the north had been overrun by the Soviet Red Army, which brutally imposed collectivisation and socialist methods on the north. They then appointed a puppet as leader, Kim Il-sung. A few years later, the United States and troops from other nations such as Australia defended the southerners from aforesaid evil communists when the latter tried to take over the whole peninsula during the Korean War. Since then, the people of the south have earnestly wanted reunification, but the totalitarian 'regime' of the north has simply not been interested.

Needless to say, this account is more than a little biased, so let me see if I can provide some correctives.

To begin with, as war historians have long pointed out (see, for instance, Geoffrey Roberts), Japan began suing for surrender as soon it became clear that its colonisation of Korea and parts of China would soon be over. This occupation had been in trouble for some time, with Chinese and Korean fighters – led by the communists – undermining the occupying forces. But the decisive moment came when the Soviet Union's Red Army arrived, fresh from the capture of Berlin and after having spent more than two weeks on the Trans-Siberian railway line. As Japanese troops were routed, Japan began suing for peace.

Somewhat alarmed, the United States hastily decided to drop an atomic bomb. This was entirely unnecessary for ending the war, since the Japanese were about to surrender. But the United States had its eyes on the post-war situation, using the two bombs to show the world, and especially the Soviet Union, its new firepower. In this light, the use of the bombs actually constitutes a war crime. Not satisfied, United States troops made haste to land on the Korean Peninsula and push as far north as possible.

At this point, the situation began to resemble Germany after the Second World War. In the north were Korean communists, led by Kim Il-sung, supported by Chinese units and the Red Army. In the south were American troops, which established the Allied Military Government. Now it becomes interesting. In theory, the Soviets and the Americans were allies, but they did not behave so. Kim Il-sung proposed that the Korean people should decide on the post-war situation in Korea. This entailed the removal of foreign forces from north and south. Negotiations over this process went on for three years.

Or rather, people tried to negotiate. The American military governor in the south, Lieutenant General Hodge, refused to meet with delegations. Syngman Rhee, a staunch anti-communist strongman, was appointed as provisional leader. Under his direction and with American support, a series of uprising in the south were brutally crushed. In autumn of 1946, workers and peasants rose up against the American occupation; from April 1948 until 1953 islanders from Jeju rebelled; in October 1948 regiments in the southern Korean army rose up in the Yeosu–Suncheon Rebellion; in December 1949, Mungyeong citizens and their families were massacred since they were suspected of being communist sympathisers. In

suppressing these socialist movements, swathes of villages were destroyed and hundreds of thousands of people were killed.

These repressions were all part of the mechanisms for establishing a separate state in the south. Indeed, it was declared in August 1948, with Syngman Rhee as president. In response, the north found itself needing to declare the formation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

The comparison with East and West Germany is striking. There too, the Anglo-American forces stalled on negotiations for a united Germany, which was pushed by the eastern Germans, as well as Stalin and Molotov. There too, plans began in 1948 for a separate state in the western parts, which was foreshadowed by a new currency. There too the West German state was declared first, in September 1949. And there too the east had no option but to respond with its own state. Throughout, the aim was to keep Germany separated, despite the will of most of the people.

In light of all this, what has happened to the desire for Korean unification? It has been consistent policy of the Democratic Republic of Korea since its earliest days. But on what terms? A northern takeover of the south? Not at all. The policy is that reunification would be undertaken without outside interference, peacefully and in terms of a federal system, socialist in the north and capitalist in the south. This position was made explicit in the Communiqué of 1972, after the leaders of both countries had secretly met. In 1973 and again in 1980, Kim Il-sung reiterated this position, proposing a Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo.

However, the most significant movement happened after the June 15th North–South Joint Declaration of 2000, between Kim Jong-il of the north and Kim Dae-jung of the south. Given that reunification has been a core northern policy, the change was obviously in the south. Here more progressive governments became open to the idea and agreed to the declaration. The change began with Kim Dae-jung's 'Sunshine' policy of 1998. The result was the opening of borders, family reunions, a series of meetings between leaders of north and south, sports, cultural and economic exchange, and even the two Olympic teams marching together at the opening ceremonies in 2000, 2004 and 2006.

But as is the way with the vagaries and uncertainties of bourgeois democracies, the south changed its tune in 2008 with the new president, Lee Myung-bak. His right-wing policies led to a hard-line approach more in tune with United States foreign policy. Cooperation ended and tensions once again escalated – the situation in which we find ourselves now.

The north Koreans I encountered view that time as one of hope disappointed, although they ardently hope for an eventual reunification along federated lines.