

Star and Stripes: History of the North Korean Flag and its Place in State Ideology

Fyodor TERTITSKIY

Abstract

This article deals with the national flag of North Korea. The author explains in detail the history behind the creation of the North Korean flag, debunking the official DPRK version that claims Kim Il-sung as responsible for its creation. Existing evidence shows that the flag was in actuality designed in the Soviet Union instead. The author then proceeds to describe how this flag was established as the DPRK's state flag in 1948 and why this decision became a cause for some unrest and even open opposition among the contemporary North Korean political elite. Furthermore, the article describes the process of distortion of the flag's history in North Korea. From the late 1950s, any notions that North Korea may have had for a different flag were systematically erased from DPRK books and monuments, and the creation of the flag retroactively attributed to Kim Il-sung. Finally, the author presents his findings on the place of the flag in DPRK ideology. Following the dramatic increase in the intensity of the personality cult in 1967, rhetoric about loyalty to the country was to a large extent substituted with rhetoric about loyalty to the Leader, and thus the ideological role of the flag—as the symbol of the state—was reduced, giving way to symbols representing the Kim dynasty.

Keywords: Flag of North Korea, Flag of the DPRK, North Korean flag, vexillology

Fyodor Tertitskiy graduated from Russian State University for Humanities, received an MA from the University of North Korean Studies (Seoul), and is currently completing his PhD at Seoul National University. His thesis looks at the Korean People's Army from a sociological perspective. His research interests include North Korean history, society and personality cult with a focus on the Kim Il-sung era. His English-language publications include: "Exclusion as a Privilege: The Chinese Diaspora in North Korea" published in *The Journal of Korean Studies* in 2015, and "The Ascension of the Ordinary Man: How the Personality Cult of Kim Il-sung Was Constructed (1945–1974)," which appeared in *Acta Koreana* the same year.

E-mail: Fyodor.tertitskiy@gmail.com

Introduction

This article explores one of the most important national symbols of North Korea: its national flag. It provides a detailed exogenesis on the origins of the flag and the discussion surrounding its adoption in 1948. The author discusses how the Soviet occupation authorities' order for a change in the flag was questioned by the North Korean political elite and even sparked the only debate in the North Korean proto-parliament.

Furthermore, the author analyses the role of the flag in state ideology and patriotic education and concludes that it is actually less significant than in most countries. The author's explanation for this is that the "cult of country" in the DPRK is overshadowed by the personality of the Kim dynasty, thus reducing the role of the flag as a symbol of the country.

It is common knowledge that the social and political power of a flag comes from it being viewed as a symbol of a certain group and/or locality. A person is unlikely to pay respect to a colored canvas, unless he or she sees it as something more than just a canvas.

French classical sociologist Emile Durkheim suggests that flags are an evolutionary step of prehistoric totems and that initially they had religious connotations and thus became treated as sacred objects (Durkheim 1995).

Robert Shanafelt further elaborates on Durkheim's observations. He points out that some form of flags can be found in virtually all cultures, be they European, Arabic or Asian. In Asia, usually it was a battle flag, a banner symbolizing a military unit or its commander (Shanafelt 2008).

National flags, symbolizing a state, came into existence later. Many claim Denmark as having the first national flag, adopted in 1219 (Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1981). It was not until the late eighteenth century, however, that flags became commonplace and standard attributes of European states. Gabriella Elgenius attributes this change to the French and American revolutions (Elgenius 2007).

As Shanafelt correctly points out, state flags are equally venerated in democracies and in dictatorships. Nazi Germany and the United States of America had tremendously different political systems, yet in both nations the flag occupied a prominent place in the national myth (Shanafelt 2008).

This is also true when it comes to the iconic dictatorship of North Korea. This article's goal is to study the history of creation of the North Korean flag. Using a broad spectrum of primary sources, ranging from Russian archival materials to South Korean

newspapers, the author traces the origins of the flag and its place in state ideology, and North Korean policy towards the South.

This article follows the Revised Romanisation of Korean, as prescribed by standards of the *Journal of Contemporary Korean Studies*, with the exception of personal names and places largely known under different spellings, such as Pyongyang.

Previous studies of North Korean state symbols

The North Korean flag is recognizable to anyone interested in the country, but there has been a very limited amount of research dedicated to the subject, with the majority written in Korean.

One of these works is an article titled “Establishing National Symbols in North and South Korea and the Law,” by Choe Chong-go (1999). This article, however, is based exclusively on secondary sources. Furthermore, the author fell victim to the North Korean hoax and retells the official Pyongyang story about the flag being allegedly designed by Kim Il-sung.

Im Chae-uk in his book *World of North Korean Symbolic Culture* (2002) tells almost the same story, though the author does mention the “rumor” of the Soviet origins of the flag. Im’s favoring of North Korean propaganda over Soviet witnesses looks rather questionable, since the DPRK government is notorious for distorting history in accordance with its state ideology.

Finally, perhaps the best work on the subject is “How the North Korean Flag was Created” by An Song-gyu (2012), which is an extensive and valuable piece. However, it tells only a part of the story: it is essentially an article about the debate surrounding the adoption of the flag, not the story of how it was created in the first place.

The first flag of Korea

Korea’s first flag was introduced in the late nineteenth century. This period was an age of opening to the West for the whole of East Asia, most vividly manifested by the Meiji Restoration in Japan. Korea, too, was forced to abandon its isolationist policy and become a member of the international community. The contemporary Western world viewed a national flag as a symbol of civilization every country should have.

Korea adopted its first modern flag in late 1882 (National archives of Korea). It

featured the yin-yang symbol in the center surrounded by four trigrams, symbolizing sky, water, land, and fire. The combination of yin and yang was often called “Great Extremes” in classic East Asian literature (太極 *taiji* in Chinese, 태극 in Korean), hence the flag got its unofficial name: Flag of Great Extremes (태극기) (Han 2008).

Figure 1. Modern version of the Flag of Great Extremes (historical variations differ slightly)



This flag remained the official symbol of Korea until 1910, when the country was annexed by its neighbor—Japan. The Japanese did not design a special symbol for their newly acquired colony. The flag of Japan—の丸 *hinomaru*—was used in official ceremonies in colonial Korea and was hoisted by Koreans loyal to the new government (Mok 2014).

The Flag of Great Extremes, therefore, became a symbol of the Korean independence movement, used by the vast majority of—if not all—groups struggling for restoration of Korea’s statehood (National archives of Korea).

After Japan was defeated in World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union came to occupy Korea. Despite the Allies not granting Korea full independence immediately, the Flag of Great Extremes was widely used in both Soviet and American occupation zones as the symbol of Korea. It was not until 1947 when the Soviet occupation authorities began to consider a change.

A new flag for a new state

After Communist takeovers in the aftermath of World War II, not all flags of the old

regimes were replaced. Sometimes, as in Cuba, Czechoslovakia or Poland, flags were not changed at all. The more common strategy was to add a communist symbol to the old flag. This approach was implemented in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, East Germany (from 1959), Yugoslavia, and Albania; the latter two countries added a five-point star to their flags.

There were, however, some states, like China and North Vietnam, which followed the example of the USSR by adopting a completely new flag whose design had virtually nothing in common with the pre-revolutionary pattern. Therefore, from 1945 to 1948 the fate of the Flag of Great Extremes was unclear.

The origins of the new flag are not discussed in contemporary North Korean literature. However, there is evidence pointing to the flag as likely being designed by the Soviet authorities. Pak Il, a Soviet-Korean then working as an interpreter in the 25th Army, which was then in control of northern Korea, gave his testimony in two interviews. One was given to the South Korean newspaper *Dong A Ilbo* in 1993 (Jang 1993), and another to the Russian magazine *Sovershenno sekretno* in 1992 (Smirnov 1992). By combining information from both interviews, the present author has constructed the following account.

According to Pak Il, one day in the summer of 1947, the political officer of the 25th Army Major General Lebedev summoned Kim Tu-bong, the vice chairman of the Provisional People's Assembly for Northern Korea, to his office and told him that soon a new state was to be created in northern Korea and that this new state would require a new flag. Lebedev then asked Kim to explain the meaning of the current Flag of Great Extremes, and state his opinion on whether it should be kept. Kim started to explain, in detail, the meaning of the flag, stating that it should continue to be used. However, General Lebedev regarded the Chinese classical philosophy upon which the design was based as hardly more than medieval superstition. After listening for some time to Kim Tu-bong's lecture about yins, yangs, trigrams of the Book of Changes and other concepts of East Asian philosophy, Lebedev interrupted Kim: "That's nonsense! Superstition! Really, wasting so much time on this crap!" Colonel Balasanov, who was also present at the discussion, grinned disparagingly: "It sounds like a legend to me."

Pak Il believed this as the probable moment when Lebedev decided to abolish the flag. A few months later, the 7th Department of the 25th Army received a design for the new flag. As the document was obviously written in Russian, Pak Il had to translate it into Korean. The flag below later became the flag of North Korea.

Figure 2. Flag of North Korea (horizontal) Flag of North Korea (vertical)



As Pak Il remembers it, the designer thought that the new flag would be hoisted vertically. The red stripe was to symbolize the land of the new Korea, illuminated by the red star of communism. The blue stripes surrounding the flag were to symbolize the seas (Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan) surrounding the Korean peninsula.

One man's testimony may not be considered enough. However, the only alternate version of the origins of the flag is the North Korean official story about its being designed by Kim Il-sung himself. Should this be true, this would have certainly been mentioned in publications in the 1940s—but there is no explanation of the origin of the flag in contemporary North Korean literature at all.

As adoption of the new flag was not immediate, the Flag of Great Extremes was used in North Korea for a few more months. Meanwhile, the introduction of the new flag met with some unexpected resistance. According to Park Pyong-yop, former candidate member of the North Korean Central Committee, who defected to South Korea in early 1980, there was a considerable number of high-ranking North Korean officials who opposed the flag change (Park and Chong 2010). They viewed the old flag as representing the independence movement and as a symbol that united the northern and southern parts of Korea.

This ultimately led to what may have been the only parliamentary debate in North Korean history.

The fight for the flag

The North Korean Constitution defines the design of the North Korean flag. Despite various amendments to the Constitution throughout North Korean history, the article describing the flag has remained unaltered:

The national flag of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea consists of a central red panel, bordered both above and below by a narrow white stripe and a broad blue

stripe. The central red panel bears a five-point red star within a white circle near the hoist. The ratio of the width to its length is 1:2.

This article first appeared in the text of the Provisional Constitution of the DPRK, composed in late 1947 and adopted in February 1948. After the constitution was revised and edited in Moscow by the Soviet Central Committee, the edited text was submitted to a Special Session of the People's Assembly for northern Korea (*Russian Foreign Policy Archive* 1948)¹. Despite the People's Assembly, like its predecessor, the Provisional People's Assembly and its successor, the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK, was nothing more than a rubber-stamp parliament. However, for this particular session, things were a little different, as certain, although still very little, freedom of discussion was allowed.

The usual process for passing a law through a communist bloc parliament is for its chairman to read the text, after which MPs vote to support it unanimously without any discussion. In a Special Session, however, deputies are allowed to make some cosmetic suggestions: like a suggestion to change the expression “mother tongue” with “national language.” These suggestions, however, were usually dismissed by the Assembly's chairman, Kim Tu-bong. However, on one occasion—namely in the discussion on Article 17—he actually put the proposal to a vote (*National Institute of Korean History* 1989). The initial text of Article 17 read as follows:

Under the socialist system, citizens get protection and are materially compensated in case of decrepitude, illness or loss of effort.

This right shall be the burden of the state's welfare system and shall be provided through medical or monetary assistance.

One of the deputies, noting the oddity in style, suggested that “loss of effort” should be changed to “loss of ability to work,” and another proposed that “This right shall be the burden of the state” be changed to “This right shall be enforced by the state.” Both suggestions were put to a vote and passed: the first amendment passed 215 to 3, and the second, 215 to 2.

This was, to the best of the author's knowledge, the only time when the North Korean parliament acted democratically: the proposed text of the law was altered though a non-unanimous vote of deputies. It may be that this relatively liberal atmosphere gave courage to the opponents of the new flag to act.

After Kim Tu-bong read Article 100, describing the national flag, he asked for opinions. Representative An Mong-yong suggested that the ratio of the width to its length be changed from 1:2 to 1:1.5, since “if the flag is too long it will easily fold when it is hoisted” (*National Institute of Korean History* 1989). Kim Tu-bong assured An that there would be no problems with the flag and dismissed his proposal.

The next one to speak was Chong Chae-yong, one of the people who defended the old flag. This man did what nobody else ever dared in North Korean history: he, a member of the Assembly, who was expected to express constant support of governmental decisions, in this case, openly questioned them (*National Institute of Korean History* 1989):

I would like to submit an opinion on the question of the national flag. I propose the Flag of Great Extremes be retained.

The Flag of Great Extremes is the manifestation of the hopes and dreams for our people. When our people were suffering under Japan's rule, they preserved the Flag of Great Extremes as hope for a fair future.

On August 15, 1945, our Korea was liberated by the great Soviet Army. All Korean people—be they young or old, men or women—were overwhelmed with the joy of liberation. They carried Flags of Great Extremes in their hands, waived them and shouted, “Hurrah!” People attached this flag to the walls of their houses as well. On every important occasion and on all major buildings the Flag of Great Extremes was always hoisted together with the great Red Banner of the Soviet Union. And a Great Extremes emblem is a part of the headgear of our People's Army and security troops as well.

All this is because the Flag of Great Extremes is dear to our people. They love this flag, they think about it with great care.

And not only northerners, but South Koreans, too, love the Flag of Great Extremes. Hence, this flag may become a weapon by which we will achieve unification. Northerners and southerners—all Koreans—may stand united under this banner.

Therefore, I submit the proposal to retain the Flag of Great Extremes.

This was unprecedented. However, Kim Tu-bong was prepared for the demarche.

He answered Chong with a very lengthy speech, in which he criticized the old Flag of Great Extremes. These were his main points:

- 1) The old flag does not comply with the idea of a “new democratic country” in general. A new country needs a new flag.
- 2) The old flag’s major concepts are yin-yang and trigrams of the Book of Changes. Thus, it is based on medical thought, not on science.
- 3) Yin-yang was a symbol of the monarchy in general and of the Lee dynasty in particular. It should not be kept in the new Republic.
- 4) The new flag is also a symbol of the country being born in the American occupation zone (i.e. the Republic of Korea). The North should distance itself from it.
- 5) The composition of trigrams used in the southern flag is wrong. Instead of having *qian* (☰) and *kan* (☵) trigrams on the left side, it has *kun* (☷) and *li* (☲) trigrams there. Thus, according to the traditional symbolic system, instead of the break of dawn, the flag symbolizes the coming of darkness.²
- 6) It is true, as Chong pointed out, that the old flag is loved by the people. But the sole cause for that is that Korea did not have any other national symbol.

The speech received thunderous applause. After, the Assembly unanimously adopted the article on the flag.

The flag is hoisted

The Constitution was adopted but was not yet put in force. It was not until July 1948 when the Soviet Union decided it was time to do so and instructed Colonel General Shtykov—the person in charge of northern Korea—to enforce it.

The decision to proclaim that the constitution of the DPRK would come into force in the regions to the north of the 38th parallel was made on July 10, 1948³ at the Fifth Session of the People’s Assembly for northern Korea. As this was an event of high importance, it deserves to be related in detail.

Here is a transcript of this event from a Soviet document (*Archive of the Russian Ministry of Defense, Collection 172, Inventory 614632*):

At 12:00, Chairman Choe Yong-gon announced that a ceremony of the change of

the national flag will take place. Choe Yong-gon stated: "Since we have enforced the Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea I suggest we proceed with a solemn change of the old national flag of Korea to the new one." The deputies responded to Choe Yong-gon's suggestion standing with heavy applause. At the same time Han Pyong-ok, the secretary of the People's Committee for North Korea and the People's Committee Department Chairmen O Ki-sop and Lee Kang-guk took down the national flag attached to the wall at the back and gave it to the chairman of the Presidium of the People's Assembly Kim Tu-bong. Followed by thunderous applause of the people present and outcries of "Manse!", Kim Tu-bong unfolded the silk canvas of the new national flag and attached in the place of the old one, next to the national flag of the USSR. The orchestra played the national anthem of Korea.

After this, Chairman Choe Yong-gon announced: "Long live the Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea!" The deputies of the People's Assembly responded to this with strong, thrice-repeated "Manse!"

The formal change of flag was far more than a mere replacement of a symbol. It was an open declaration that North Korea would—invariably—become an independent state in the near future. Thus, all the talks of a unified government for the whole Korean peninsula were de-facto put to an end on this day. It also meant that the new Korea would distance itself from its history to build the new, communist state.

At the beginning, the decision to change the flag was quite unpopular among politically active Koreans. Yo Un-hyong, a prominent South Korean leftist, proclaimed the change of flag as "not right". The Party of Young Friends of the Heavenly Way Religion, which at the time still retained some political autonomy, also criticized the new flag (*Central Archive of the Russian Ministry of Defense, Collection 172, Inventory 614633*), and on some occasions the party's members refused to participate in demonstrations under the new flag (*Central Archive of the Russian Ministry of Defense, Collection 127, Inventory 468007c*).

Thus, Kim Tu-bong felt the need to respond to the criticism. Ten days after the adoption of the new flag, he held a press conference explaining the decision, and in August 1948 published a book titled, *On the Establishment of the New National Flag and the Abolition of the Flag of Great Extremes* (1948). The book, divided into seven chapters, focused on seven specific theses:

- 1) The New Flag as the symbol of the newly emerging country with a bright future
- 2) The New Flag as the symbol of a prosperous and harmonious country

- 3) The New Flag as the symbol of a joyful country developing in brilliance
- 4) The Flag of Great Extremes as contradictory to the nature of the new democratic order
- 5) The “scientific” reasons behind the Flag of Great Extremes as being, in fact, unscientific and superstitious
- 6) The lack of standard meaning and standard design for the Flag of Great Extremes
The needless unintelligibility and multifariousness of the Flag of Great Extremes as contributing to disunity

As one can see, the book’s theses were almost identical to those given by Kim Tu-bong when he rebuffed Chong Chae-yong earlier in April.

Moreover, a song named “The Proclamation of the People’s Republic” was composed to commemorate the adoption of the Constitution. This song, played at official events in late summer-autumn of 1948, served as a de-facto national anthem. Its first verse mentioned the new flag, positioning it as an important part of nation-building discourse.

From the Heavenly Lake of the Mount Paektu to the farthest shore of Jeju Island, Thirty million hoist the new flag and advance forward.

The Flag of Great Extremes disappeared from North Korea within days of the Constitution being enforced. On August 15, the Republic of Korea was established in Seoul—with the Flag of Great Extremes as its national flag. From then on, the Flag of Great Extremes ceased to be a symbol of Korean unity and became solely associated with South Korea.

The role of the flag in inter-Korean politics

The DPRK presented itself as a government for the whole of Korea and in just two years invaded the South, trying to make this vision a reality.

Logically, North Korea attempted to present its flag as the symbol of all of Korea as well, not just of the North. The Workers’ Party of South Korea, the main pro-Pyongyang organization in the South, officially welcomed the creation of the DPRK and called on its supporters to “unite under the banner of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” (*Working People* 1948). In the late 1940s media reported on pro-communist activists in South Korea hoisting the North Korean flag (*Dong-a Ilbo* 1948,

Sept 14; *Dong-a Ilbo* 1948, Sept 21; *Dong-a Ilbo* 1948, Oct 10).

When North Korea occupied most of the South during the first stage of the Korean War, the flag was hoisted across the occupied area as a symbol of “revolution,” “liberation,” and a “unified socialist Motherland” (Kim 2009).

The Korean War ended with a truce in 1953 but Korea was still divided between the North and the South. North Korea still hoped that one day the country would be unified under the banner of Kim Il-sung. In the late 1970s, following the fall of Saigon and the unification of Vietnam, North Korea created an underground organization in the South called the “National Liberation Front for South Korea.” It obviously mimicked the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam, better known under its Vietnamese name Việt Cộng, and copied its flag (Park 2013).

Figure 3. Flags



In this we may see how changes in North Korean policy were reflected in changes in flag usage. Earlier on in the 1950s, Pyongyang had viewed South Korea as truly the “southern part of the Republic,” and thus the Pro-Pyongyang forces did not need their own national symbol, since they fought under the same banner as the People’s Army. But in the 1970s the South came to be viewed more like a separate entity, and thus the independent flag was designed to be used by the southern Pyongyang sympathizers.

However, this organization, unlike its Vietnamese counterpart, had no chance of succeeding. South Korea was by far richer and less corrupt than South Vietnam and the Seoul government had greater support from the people than did Saigon. The economic gap between North and South Korea continued to grow, and in 1987, South Korea successfully transcended to a democracy.

Eventually Pyongyang abandoned all hope of absorbing South Korea and both Koreas started to assert their goal as “peaceful reunification”—a goal also reflected in flags. That is, from the 2000s, both South and North Korean flags were used at inter-Korean meetings and a third flag, featuring the light blue silhouette of the Korean Peninsula, is now used as an official “Unification Flag.”

Figure 4. A variation of the Unification Flag



Rewriting history

From the late 1950s the DPRK started to rewrite its history, and this included the history of its flag.

Up until at least 1955, North Korean publications did acknowledge the Flag of Great Extremes as the past symbol of Korea. However, in the late 1950s, when Pyongyang began to become increasingly more politically independent from Moscow, the North Korean authorities began to falsify the history of the flag. The first stage was to erase the Flag of Great Extremes from history. The second was to attribute creation of the new flag to Kim Il-sung himself.

The first stage started as early as 1959. In the book, *Democratic People's Republic of Korea: 1948-1958* (Chong 2008) all photos containing the Flag of Great Extremes were re-touched: the old flag was removed, as if it had never existed. According to the journal of the Soviet ambassador to the DPRK, in 1959, the image of the Soviet soldier carrying a Soviet flag and shaking hands with a Korean man holding the Flag of Great Extremes was removed from the Liberation monument in Pyongyang. It should be noted that the source (Puzanov 1959) mistakenly mentions that the “South Korean coat of arms” had been removed, not the flag. However, since South Korea adopted a coat of arms only in 1963 (National archives of Korea), and the Flag of Great Extremes can be clearly seen in old video footage showing the Liberation monument (*Critical Past*) it would be logical to assume that the author of the document actually meant the flag, not the coat of arms.

Figure 5. This picture was removed from the Monument in 1959



Henceforth it became a policy: no historical photos containing the Flag of Great Extremes were to be published in North Korea. Of course, the flag was not depicted in historical paintings or in films, nor was it ever mentioned in any historical books.

The logic behind this decision is not hard to deduce: the Flag of Great Extremes was seen as a symbol of South Korea, the DPRK's main enemy, so having Kim Il-sung and other North Korean leaders appear under this flag could produce undesirable effects.

In 1967, North Korea announced the establishment of the “monolithic ideological system of the Party” at the Fifteenth Plenum of the Fourth Central Committee. After that, Kim Il-sung's personality cult experienced a dramatic increase in intensity and pervasiveness (Tertitskiy 2015). The authorities started to rewrite the history of the country, and according to this new version it was Kim Il-sung and his guerrilla comrades who played the decisive role in defeating the Japanese empire; it was Kim Il-sung who led the creation of the new Korean state; and, of course, it was Kim Il-sung who designed the national flag.

The flag was granted new symbolism as well. The red color (star and a stripe) was claimed to symbolize the “anti-Japanese revolution” of Kim Il-sung; while the two blue stripes allegedly stood for “the gallant visage of our people, symbolizing the spirit of the Korean people fighting for world peace and progress” (*Rodong Shinmun*, August 2013). And perhaps the oddest part was the new symbolic meaning of the white part of the flag, which stood for: “one bloodline, one land, one language, one culture of our mono-ethnic country, which lived in purity” (*Rodong Shinmun*, August 2013). The North Korean flag has two white stripes separated from one another so the idea of these being a symbol of unity looks rather questionable.

The new official version of the history of the North Korean flag has been cited in various official publications, including the *Big Encyclopedia of Korea* (The Big Encyclopedia of Korea 2001), on the North Korean website “Naenara” (“The DPRK’s flag”), and in the country’s main official newspaper *Rodong Shinmun*. It has also been retold on national television and is available on YouTube.

Moreover, the *Complete Works of Kim Il-sung*—a collection of all works allegedly written by Kim—includes a speech titled “Making a good project of the country’s coat of arms and national flag,” which is dated January 19, 1948 (Kim 1994). In the speech, Kim Il-sung observes the designs of the coat of arms and national flag and instructs to replace the furnace featured in the coat of arms with a hydroelectric power plant as well as to adjust the flag’s proportions and to put a red star on it.

As most of the contents of the *Complete Works of Kim Il-sung* are from the 1940s, this speech is a fabrication. Kim Il-sung obviously never gave such a speech and it contradicts well-established historical fact: for example, the furnace in the coat of arms, which Kim allegedly instructed to remove in January, was in fact changed to a power plant only in September, at the First Session of the Supreme People’s Assembly.

The reason for this falsification is obvious. From 1967, North Korean state ideology became Kim Il-sung-centered and a series of myths surrounding his figure were created. These myths positioned him as the leader of the anti-Japanese movement, the one who defeated Japan, and the creator of the new nation state. Logically, he was also positioned as the one who designed the most important national symbol—the flag. One should note that, of course, admitting the truth about the origins of the flag was completely unacceptable even before 1967: no other country in the communist bloc had had its flag designed by the Soviet authorities, and in North Korean publications, this fact was simply not revealed.

The place of the flag in North Korean ideology

The national flag occupies a major place in North Korean state ideology, as an important symbol of the country. As stated earlier, its design is prescribed by the Constitution. North Korea also adopted the the National Flag Law in 1992, which regulates how and when the flag is hoisted (*Laws of the DPRK* 2014).

Children are taught the official story about the creation of the flag beginning in kindergarten and draw the flag in art classes.⁴

“Samilpo,” the North Korean-made electronic dictionary of the DPRK’s songs, lists seven songs dedicated to the national flag: “Unfurl the Flag of the Republic, our Tricolor,” “Shine Gloriously, the Banner of the Republic,” “Flag of the Republic,” two songs named “Banner of the Republic,” “Our Country’s Flag,” and “The Flag of the Republic Flaps”.

However, all of this is hardly unique to North Korea. Similar rituals surrounding the national flag are found in most countries, including developed democracies such as the United States. Rather, what *is* unexpected is that the cult of the flag in North Korea is actually less intensive than it is in most countries.

Many countries have Flag Day, which commemorates the establishment of the country’s national flag. North Korea does not. Desecration of the national flag is not officially considered a criminal offence in the DPRK (*The Penal code of the DPRK*). In school, students do not pledge their allegiance to the flag. The flag is not even used in the military when soldiers reiterate the pledge of allegiance.⁵

The lack of ritual surrounding the flag may be explained by the specifics of the DPRK’s ideology. Loyalty to the country and other patriotic virtues are replaced with loyalty to the Leader. “The Leader is the motherland”—asserts *Rodong Shinmun* (July 2013). Hence, the role of the flag—the symbol of the country—is reduced to make way for portraits and other symbols of the ruling dynasty.

Conclusion

The history of the flag of North Korea does to a certain extent mirror the history of the country itself. The DPRK was created by the Soviet Union—and so was its flag. The new communist tradition was to replace the old one, which was considered feudal, and so the new flag replaced the old one. The Soviets concealed their direct control over North Korea in the late 1940s by having their decisions officially promoted by North

Korean state institutions, and similarly, the Soviet origin of the flag was never revealed.

After 1967, Kim Il-sung rewrote North Korean history in his own image, proclaiming the flag as his design as well. Thus, its composition was assigned new symbolical meaning as well.

In this new North Korea, the figure of the Fatherly Leader—presented as North Korea's creator, leader, and source of legitimacy—overshadowed the army and even the country itself. Thus the flag, being the symbol of the country but not of Kim Il-sung himself, began to occupy a lesser place in North Korean ideology than symbols of the Leader.

Nevertheless, this flag—the creation of an unknown Soviet official—is still one of the most important symbols of the North Korean state, and will probably remain so for as long as North Korea itself exists.

Notes

1. A copy of the document is available in the archive of the National Institute of Korean History.
2. This one was a fair point. Later, on October 15, 1949, the ROK Ministry of Education promulgated an order, establishing the new—proper—composition of the flag. This flag is now the flag of the Republic of Korea.
3. Some sources, including Lee (2009), claim that it occurred on July 8. However, the Fifth Session lasted from July 8 to July 10, and the flag was changed on the last day of the session.
4. This information was obtained through an interview with a refugee from North Korea, a former kindergarten teacher.
5. This information was obtained through an interview with a refugee from North Korea, a former senior sergeant in the DPRK army.

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Special Terms

Complete Works of Kim Il-sung 김일성전집 金日成全集

Flag of Great Extremes 태극기 太極旗

Flag of the Peoples' Republic 인공기 人共旗

Flag of the Republic 공화국기 共和國旗

National Flag Law 국기법 旗國法

Party of Young Friends of the Heavenly Way Religion 천도교청우당 天道敎靑友黨

The Proclamation of the People's Republic 인민공화국 선포의 노래