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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The fall: The Soviet community in North Korea

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Abstract

This article examines the fate of the Soviet community in North Korea, arguing that its trajectory closely mirrored the evolving relationship between the Soviet Union and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Between the 1940s and the 1990s, Moscow-Pyongyang relations transformed from quasi-colonial Soviet dominance in the late 1940s to Pyongyang's successful assertion of political independence in the mid-1950s, followed by antagonism in the 1960s and 1970s, a thaw in the mid-1980s, and, finally, a decline into insignificance from the 1990s to the early 2020s. Similarly, the Soviet community shifted from a position of political influence to a marginalized group that eventually disappeared altogether.

The narrative begins with the community's formation following the Soviet occupation of North Korea in 1945 and traces its evolution through the shifting geopolitical landscape of the Cold War. The article explores the roles of various subgroups within the community—Soviet administrators, ethnic Koreans with Soviet citizenship, and ordinary Soviet citizens—highlighting the unique social and political challenges each faced under the Kim regime. It examines the community's decline in the late 1950s as Kim Il-sung consolidated power, expelling Soviet advisers and enforcing naturalization policies that compelled most members of this group to abandon their Soviet ties or endure severe discrimination.

Drawing on recently declassified Russian archival documents, the article provides a fresh empirical perspective and offers a periodization of the community's history. In doing so, it sheds light on a little-known aspect of Soviet-North Korean relations and the broader dynamics of post-colonial transitions.

Keywords: Minorities in North Korea; Soviet-North Korean relations; Soviet citizens in North Korea; Kim Il-sung; post-colonialism

Introduction

The story of the Soviet diaspora in North Korea is one of power, persecution, and painful erasure. In the late 1940s, Soviet citizens played a pivotal role in shaping the nascent North Korean state, wielding influence at every level: from high-ranking officials who dictated policy to ordinary citizens who found themselves swept into an unfamiliar land through marriage or duty. But as Kim Il-sung's grip on power tightened, the community faced relentless pressure. Advisers were expelled, Soviet-Korean officials were purged or executed, and ordinary Soviet citizens were isolated, denied

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embassy access, and coerced into renouncing their nationality. What had once been a visible and powerful presence dwindled into a fearful, fragmented remnant, forced into obscurity by a regime that sought to erase all traces of foreign influence.

By the 1980s, the Soviet community had been reduced to a handful of individuals, struggling to navigate a country that no longer wanted them. The collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 left many stranded, stateless, and abandoned, as Moscow offered no lifeline to those who had once called the Soviet Union home. North Korea's last remaining Russian, Vladimir Lee, lived out his final years as a relic of a forgotten past, a lone survivor of a community that had once numbered in the thousands. With his passing, the last link to the Soviet presence in North Korea was severed, bringing to a close a chapter of history marked by loyalty and betrayal, privilege and persecution, and ultimately, the triumph of the dictatorial state over those who had sought to shape it.

This article is dedicated to the fascinating yet tragic history of a unique community, a history that has now come to a close with the passing of its last member. It begins by examining the existing body of literature on the subject, which, notably, only covers the early years of this social group. Subsequent decades have remained largely unexplored. This article seeks to fill this gap by drawing upon an extensive array of archival sources, revealing the relentless pressure exerted by Pyongyang on the community in its ultimately successful efforts to erase it from existence. Moreover, it explores how major historical developments, such as a series of Soviet treaties with other socialist states in the 1950s that banned dual citizenship and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, shaped the community's fate.

The article proposes a typology, suggesting that the community can be subdivided into three distinct groups, each with its own unique characteristics. It also introduces a periodization framework, identifying several key phases in the community's history. To further illuminate the dynamics of this community, the article employs a well-established comparative method, identifying cases most similar to the one being studied.[1] Specifically, it draws comparisons between the Soviet community in North Korea and two other groups: Soviet citizens in communist Albania and Chinese nationals in North Korea. The former were fellow Soviet citizens living in a country that bore striking similarities to North Korea—an isolated, hyper-authoritarian communist state with strained relations with Moscow. The latter, like the Soviets, were citizens of another communist superpower but were subject to the pressures of North Korea's rigid ideological control. Through these comparisons, the article sheds new light on the Soviet community in North Korea, offering fresh insights into the broader dynamics of socialist states and the lives of foreign nationals caught in the web of Cold War politics.

Literature

Arguably, the most comprehensive account of the community comes from the annotated memoirs of Chang Hak-pong, himself a member of the community, making

[1]Richard A. Nielsen, 'Case Selection via Matching', *Sociological Methods and Research*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2016, pp. 569–597.

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these memoirs valuable as both a primary and secondary source.[2] Andrei Lankov has written extensively on the community[3] and Soviet domination over North Korea during its formative years.[4] Kim Guk-hu published several books in the early 1990s based on interviews with former members of the community.[5] Later, scholars like Igor Selivanov,[6] German Kim,[7] and U Dong-hyŏn,[8] who primarily used archival sources, also contributed significantly to this field. Additionally, the author of this article has published several works on the individual biographies of community members.[9]

There are several gaps in the existing literature. First, very few, if any, works extend beyond the 1950s, leaving much of the community's history underexplored. Second, these works typically fail to conceptualize the community in any depth, often merely stating that they were Soviet people in North Korea. This article aims to expand the chronological scope to the 2020s, when the community ultimately dissipated, and to provide a typology that explains the distinct subgroups within it. Additionally, it attempts to compare the community with similar social groups, a comparison that has not been addressed in the literature thus far.

The methodology

It would not be an exaggeration to say that North Korean sources on the Soviet community are virtually non-existent. Open North Korean sources have only mentioned the community once, in a singular report on a joint celebration of the October Revolution's anniversary.[10] Access to other sources is highly restricted, and state historiography provides a deliberately falsified portrayal of the 1940s and 1950s that aims at erasing all traces of Soviet domination or even its presence.[11]

Thus, the most important sources for this article are Russian archival documents. While documents from the 1940s and 1950s have been studied, those from the later era

[2]Chang Hak-pong et al., *Pukchosŏnŭl mandŭn Koryŏin iyagi* (P'aju: Kyŏngin munhwasa, 2006).

[3]Andrei Lankov, 'Kim Il Sung's Campaign Against the Soviet Faction in Late 1955 and the Birth of Chuch'e', *Korean Studies*, vol. 23 (January 1999), pp. 43–67; Andrei Lankov, '*Vozniknoveniye i deyatel'nost' sovetskoy gruppirovki v KNDR*', *Vostok*, vol. 1, 2003, pp. 104–119.

[4]Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945–1960* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

[5]Kim Guk-hu, *P'yŏngyangŭi Soryŏn kunjŏng* (P'aju: Hanul, 2008); Kim Guk-hu, *P'yŏngyangŭi k'areisŭk'i ellit'ŭdŭl* (P'aju: Hanul, 2013); Kim Guk-hu, *Pirok Chosŏn Minjujuŭi Inmin Konghwaguk* (Seoul: Chungang Ilbosa, 1992).

[6]Igor Selivanov, *Sovetskiye koreytsy v Severnoy Koreye: issledovaniya, vospominanya, dokumenty* (Kursk: Kursk National University, 2018).

[7]German Kim (ed.), *Po zadaniyu partii i zovu serdtsa: sovetskiye koreytsy s Severnoy Koreye* (Moscow: Avanlayn, 2020).

[8]U Dong-hyŏn, '*1945~1950nyŏn chaebuk Soryŏn'gye chosŏninŭi hwaldonggwa sŏnggyŏk*', MA thesis, Seoul National University, 2016.

[9]Fyodor Tertitskiy, *The Forgotten Political Elites of North Korea: Woe to the Vanquished* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024); Fyodor Tertitskiy, 'The Soviet Governors of North Korea: Ivan Chistyakov and Terentiy Shtykov', in Fyodor Tertitskiy, *Soviet-North Korean Relations During the Cold War: Unruly Offspring* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).

[10]'*P'yŏngyang shinae kŭllojadŭl chaeP'yŏngyang Ssoryŏn kisulchadŭl mit' Ssoryŏn kongmindŭlgwa ch'insŏn yahoe chinhaeng*', *Rodong Shinmun*, 6 November 1959, p. 4.

[11]Fyodor Tertitskiy, 'A Blatant Lie: The North Korean Myth of Kim Il-sung Liberating the Country from Japan', *Korea Observer*, June 2018, pp. 219–238.

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have only recently been declassified and are introduced in this article for the first time, making it an empirical contribution. Conceptually, this article offers a periodization of the community's history and a typology of its subgroups, an approach that has not been attempted in previous research.

The origins: 1945 to the early 1950s

North Korea originated from the Soviet occupation zone, when in 1945 the Red Army conquered the northern part of the Korean Peninsula and installed Kim Il-sung as its leader. Initially under near-complete Soviet control, the nascent North Korean regime gradually asserted itself and broke free from Soviet domination in the late 1950s.

After the Soviet Army's arrival in North Korea in August 1945, Moscow dispatched a significant number of its citizens to the region, giving birth to a Soviet community. This community can be roughly categorized into three groups.

The first group comprised Soviet administrators (pre-1948), diplomats (post-1948), and advisers. Initially exerting direct occupation authority in 1945, the Soviets swiftly transitioned to a quasi-local governance model. A local proto-government was established in February 1946, although its practical authority mostly extended to endorsing decisions made by the Soviet administration.[12] Local control was maintained through the offices of regional commandants. With the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948, the Soviet administration was reorganized into an embassy, and local oversight shifted to Soviet advisers supervising North Korean military and civilian institutions. The Soviet administration was the one that drafted and implemented the land reform of 1946:[13] the entire composition of the first North Korean cabinet of ministers was decided by the future ambassador, Shtykov, before it was formally announced to the North Korean legislature for its rubber-stamp approval.[14] The Korean War of 1950–1953 was also launched only after the Soviets provided their explicit blessing.[15]

During that war, the Soviet hand remained visible, though it began to tremble. Shtykov relayed Stalin's orders until his recall in October 1950,[16] while Stalin himself dictated the key decisions, even pressuring Mao Zedong into sending Chinese troops that would rescue North Korea from obliteration.[17] Yet cracks in Soviet authority

[12]On these events, see Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*; Kim Gwang-un, *Pukhan chŏngch'isa yŏn'gu 1* (Seoul: Sŏnin, 2003).

[13]Chŏn Hyŏn-su, '*Haebang chikhu Pukhan ŭi t'oji kaehyŏk*', *Taegu Sahak*, vol. 68, 2002, pp. 85–135.

[14]*Dnevnik T. F. Shtykova*, 27 August 1948, http://db.history.go.kr/item/compareViewer.do?levelId=fs_010r_0010_0040_0150, [accessed 26 January 2026]; *Dnevnik T. F. Shtykova*, 30 August 1948, http://db.history.go.kr/item/compareViewer.do?levelId=fs_010r_0010_0040_0170, [accessed 26 January 2026].

[15]Sheila Miyoshi Jager, 'Momentous Decisions', in Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013), pp. 55–65.

[16]*Protokol no. 79. Resheniye Politbyuro TsK. 126. O tov. Shtykove T. F.* [Protocol no 79. Decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee. Item no. 126. On Comrade T. F. Shtykov], Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, collection 17, folder 3, item 1086, p. 24.

[17]Tertitskiy, *Soviet-North Korean Relations*, p. 54.

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started to appear as Stalin's instructions encouraged Kim Il-sung to act independently.[18] The Chinese Volunteers Army, which entered the war in the autumn of 1950, operated outside of Soviet command, reporting occasionally to Razuvayev,[19] Shtykov's successor, but just as often rejecting Soviet advice outright.[20]

The second group, often termed 'the Soviet faction' in academia, consisted of individuals of Soviet origin working in North Korean institutions. Unlike the first group, they were given DPRK citizenship to work in the country, and by the mid-1950s, most of the surviving members had started to renounce their Soviet citizenship. Ethnicity was another distinguishing factor, as this group comprised predominantly ethnic Koreans, with just a few of mixed heritage. Arguably its most prominent member was Party Deputy Chairman Ho Ga-i, who at some point was evidently considered by the Soviets to become North Korea's leader instead of Kim Il-sung.[21] He was also the only Soviet Korean present at the top-secret meeting in 1950 where Kim Il-sung announced the impending invasion of South Korea.[22] The second member of note was Vice-Premier Pak Ch'ang-ok, notable for being the only North Korean politician to formally propose the potential removal of Kim Il-sung from his premiership in 1955.[23] Another was General Pang Hak-se, the founder of the North Korean secret police and security apparatus.[24]

The third group consisted of ordinary Soviet citizens living in North Korea. At the time, Moscow considered marriage to a foreigner as almost the only valid reason for permanently leaving the country, so these individuals were primarily spouses of North Koreans who had married in the Soviet Union. Notably, while the first and second groups were predominantly men, the majority of this third group were women[25] who had married North Korean men. These marriages took place before 1947, as the USSR banned marriages between Soviet citizens and foreign nationals between 15 February

[18] *Telegramma Predsedatelya Soveta Ministrov SSSR Glavnomy voyannomy sovetniku Koreyskoy Narodnoy armii s ukazaniyem razobrat'sya v suti poslannyh yemu raneye predlozheniy o povyshenii boyesposobnosti KNA* [Telegram from the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR to the Chief Military Adviser to the Korean People's Army with instructions to sort out the essence of the proposals sent earlier to him to increase the combat effectiveness of the KPA], 3 February 1951, Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, collection 45, folder 1, item 348, p. 20.

[19] Kotov, *O boyevyh deystviyah v Koreye* [On the Military Action in Korea], in *Soryŏn Kunsa Komundanjang Rajubayep'ŭ ŭi 6.25chŏnjaeng pogosŏ* [Reports on the Korean War by the Soviet Chief Military Advisor Razuvayev] (Seoul: Kukpangbu Kunsa P'yŏnch'an Yŏn'guso, 2001). The book is a collection of reprinted Soviet documents, and, unusually, it does not have numbered pages, making it impossible to provide a page reference.

[20] Kochergin, *Nachalniku Glavnogo Operativnogo Upravleniya Genral'nogo Shtaba Sovetskoy Armii* [To the Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff of the Soviet Army], in *Soryŏn Kunsa Komundanjang Rajubayep'ŭ ŭi 6.25chŏnjaeng pogosŏ*.

[21] Tertitskiy, *Forgotten Political Elites*, p. 105.

[22] Hong Sun-gwan, '*Chŏn Kim Il-sŏng pisŏ shiljang ch'unggyŏk kobaek*', *Shindonga*, October 1994, pp. 188–207.

[23] *Iz dnevnika sovetnika posol'stva SSSR v KNDR tov. Filatova S.N. Zapis' besedy s Pak Yen Binom*, 25 February 1956, Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, collection 102, inventory 12, folder 6, item 68.

[24] Chang Hak-pong et al., 'Pang Hak-se', in *Pukchosŏnŭl mandŭn Koryŏin iyagi*, pp. 441–443; Tertitskiy, 'Pang Hak-se', in Tertitskiy, *Forgotten Political Elites*, pp. 88–99.

[25] Iz dnevnika Shubnikova N. M., *Zapis' besedy s zamestitelem zaveduyuschego I departamenta MID KNDR Pak Si Gvonom*, 4 May 1970, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 62, item 461, pp. 77–82.

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Table 1. Composition of the early Soviet community in North Korea

	Soviet diplomats and advisers	North Korean officials of Soviet origin	Ordinary Soviet citizens
Citizenship	USSR	Dual, only DPRK from *circa* 1955	USSR
Sex	Mostly men	Mostly men	Mostly women
Ethnicity	Mostly non-Korean	Almost always Korean	Both Korean and non-Korean

1947 and 26 November 1953.[26] During the Korean War, most of these women were evacuated to China, where a school was set up for their children. They returned to Korea after the armistice was signed in July 1953.[27] Table 1 highlights the distinctions between the three groups.

The demise: the 1950s

After the war the situation started to change. The fact that, unlike in Eastern Europe, North Korea did not have a Soviet military presence on its soil allowed Kim Il-sung to start a campaign aiming at subverting and reducing Moscow's influence. Arguably the key event here was the August Plenum of 1956 when the anti-Kim opposition unsuccessfully attempted to remove him from power.[28] After surviving a backlash from Moscow, Kim used the lack of experience of then-Soviet Ambassador Puzanov to break free of Soviet control.[29] By the end of 1957 he was effectively an independent ruler. Kim Il-sung steadily reduced the number of Soviet advisers in the DPRK, ultimately requesting the departure of those who remained.[30] The embassy effectively became a regular diplomatic institution, instead of the decision-making centre it used to be.[31]

The fate of the Soviet Koreans in the North Korean government was similar. As Kim Il-sung started to assert himself during the Korean War, and even more so after

[26]'*Ukaz Prezidiuma Verhovnogo Soveta SSSR ot 25 noyabrya 1953 goda 'Ob otmene Ukaza Prezidiuma Verhovnogo Soveta SSSR ot 15 fevralya 1947 goda 'O vospreschenii brakov mezhdu grazhdanami SSSR I inostrantsami*", in *Zakonodatel'stvo SSSR i mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya po voprosam grazhdanstva* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya, 1964), p. 28.

[27]On this, see Tertitskiy, *Forgotten Political Elites*, pp. 133–134.

[28]Kim Jae-ung, *Yegodoen k'udet'a, 8wŏl chongp'a sagŏn* (Seoul: P'urŭn Yŏksa, 2024); Fyodor Tertitskiy, 'The Last Days of Summer: The Story of the August Plenum', in Tertitskiy, *Soviet-North Korean Relations*, pp. 69–102; Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); James F. Person, 'North Korea in 1956: Reconsidering the August Plenum and the Sino-Soviet Joint Intervention', *Cold War History*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2019, pp. 253–274.

[29]Fyodor Tertitskiy, 'His Last Bow', in Fyodor Tertitskiy, *Accidental Tyrant: The Life of Kim Il-sung* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2025), pp. 135–145.

[30]*Iz dnevnika vremennogo poverennogo v delah SSSR v KNDR Pelishenko V. I. Zapis' besedy s Kim Ir Senom 16 yanvarya 1957 goda.* Document from the author's collection; Tertitskiy, *Forgotten Political Elites*, pp. 44–46.

[31]Fyodor Tertitskiy, 'Kim Il-sung's Road to an Independent Autocracy', in Tertitskiy, *Soviet-North Korean Relations*, pp. 103–113.

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Stalin's death in 1953, this group was subjected to a barrage of criticism and demotions, culminating in purges.[32]

A significant factor in the demise of the second group was the Soviet-North Korean agreement that effectively prohibited holding both Soviet and North Korean citizenship. Any dual Soviet-North Korean citizen in North Korea was required to forfeit their Soviet citizenship unless they applied to the Soviet embassy before December 1958 to retain it. If they did apply, their North Korean citizenship was revoked.[33] Therefore, to remain in the elite, one had to give up Soviet citizenship, thus losing Moscow's protection. Interestingly, this change was part of a broader political strategy that in all likelihood did not consider the existence of the Soviet-North Korean elite as a factor. This treaty was initiated by Moscow and was one of many similar agreements signed with socialist countries: in late 1957, the USSR signed comparable treaties with Romania, Albania, and Bulgaria.[34]

Ultimately, some individuals managed to escape the country and flee to the USSR. Notable examples include Yu Sŏng-ch'ŏl, chief of the Korean People's Army's (KPA) operations department during the Korean War, and Kang Sang-ho, former vice-minister of internal affairs. Yu was spared as a gesture ahead of Nikita Khrushchev's expected state visit (which was eventually cancelled), and Kang was saved through a combination of luck, resilience, and support from the Soviet embassy, which petitioned for his Soviet citizenship to be reinstated.[35]

Others met grim fates in North Korean camps and prisons, such as vice-premiers Pak Ch'ang-ok and Pak Ŭi-wan.[36] Only a few who were known for their steadfast loyalty to Kim Il-sung were spared. The four individuals who remained in top leadership were Nam Il, minister of foreign affairs (1953–1959); Pak Chŏng-ae, chair of the North Korean Women's League until 1965; Pang Hak-se, chairman of the Central Court (1972–1992); and Kim Bong-nyul, a KPA commander who was promoted to vice-marshal of the KPA

[32]On these events, see Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*; Balázs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953–1964* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005); Tertitskiy, *Soviet-North Korean Relations*; Kim (ed.), *Po zadaniyu partii i zovu serdtsa: sovetskiye kereytsy s Severnoy Koreye.*

[33]*Konventsiya mezhdu Pravitel'stvom Soyuza Sovetskih Sotsialisticheskih Respublik i Pravitel'stvom Koreyskoy Narodno-Demokraticheskoy Respubliki ob uregulirovanii voprosa o grazhdanstve lits s dvoynym grazhdanstvom* (Pyongyang, 16 December 1957), *Vedomosti Verhovnogo Soveta SSSR*, no. 4, 1958, pp. 216–218; '*Chosŏn Minjujuŭi Inmin Konghwagukkwa Ssobet'ŭ Sahoejuŭi Konghwaguk Ryŏnmaeng kanŭi pŏmnyulsang pangjo chegonge kwanhan choyak, ijung kukchŏkchadŭrŭi kongmin'gwŏn munje chojŏre kwanhan hyŏbyak mit' ryŏngsa hyŏbyak ch'egyŏre kwanhan k'ommyunik'e*', *Rodong Shinmun*, 19 December 1957, p. 5.

[34]*Konventsiya mezhdu Pravitel'stvom Soyuza Sovetskih Sotsialisticheskih Respublik i Rumysnkoy Narodnoy Respublikoy ob uregulirovanii voprosa o grazhdanstve lits s dvoynym grazhdanstvom*, 4 September 1957, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/international_contracts/2_contract/49651/, [accessed 26 January 2026]; *Konventsiya mezhdu Pravitel'stvom Soyuza Sovetskih Sotsialisticheskih Respublik i Narodnoy Respublikoy Albaniyey ob uregulirovanii voprosa o grazhdanstve lits s dvoynym grazhdanstvom*, 18 September 1957, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/international_contracts/2_contract/49666/, [accessed 26 January 2026]; *Konventsiya mezhdu Pravitel'stvom Soyuza Sovetskih Sotsialisticheskih Respublik i Narodnoy Respublikoy Bolgariyey ob uregulirovanii voprosa o grazhdanstve lits s dvoynym grazhdanstvom* 12 December 1957, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/international_contracts/2_contract/49565/, [accessed 26 January 2026].

[35]On these two men, see Tertitskiy, *Forgotten Political Elites*, pp. 24–35, 114–134.

[36]V. Pelishenko, *Zapis' besedy s ministrom vnutrennih del KNDR tov. Pan Hak Se.12 fevralya 1960 goda*, Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, collection 0541, inventory 15, folder 9, item 85.

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in 1995. They spent the rest of their lives following Kim Il-sung's directives without showing initiative, existing as mere conduits of his will.[37] In a revealing incident in 1963, Nam Il's wife tearfully told a Soviet diplomat's spouse that she and her husband wanted to return to the Soviet Union—but it was too late for them.[38]

The fate of the third group was somewhat different. Neither Moscow nor Pyongyang wished to make public any changes in their relations. A façade of 'friendship' allowed the USSR to entertain the idea of influencing North Korea, while Pyongyang used this to continue extracting economic aid from the Soviet Union. As the Soviets lifted the ban on marrying foreigners in 1953, several dozen Soviet women married North Korean men between 1954 and 1960 and moved to the DPRK.[39]

The vivid sign of the declining Soviet presence in North Korea was the fate of the Sixth Secondary School (*ryuk kojunghakkyo*) for Soviet children. Opened in 1953 (in addition to the embassy's school to accommodate the children who came to the country after the end of the war), it initially was considered an elite institution. Reportedly, even Kim Il-sung's son and future heir Kim Jong-il wanted to study there but was forbidden from doing so by his father.[40] As the political climate in North Korea shifted, the school was disbanded in 1958, after just five years of operation.[41]

In conclusion, the post-war period marked a great shift in North Korea's relationship with the Soviet Union, largely driven by Kim Il-sung's growing independence. The absence of a Soviet military presence in North Korea allowed Kim to challenge Moscow's influence, culminating in the August Plenum of 1956, where an attempt to remove him from power failed. By the end of 1957, Kim had successfully circumnavigated Moscow's pressure, purged Soviet-aligned officials, and reduced Soviet influence within the country, even instituting a policy that forced Soviet-North Korean dual citizens to choose between their allegiances. As a result, the Soviet presence in North Korea diminished, and while Moscow and Pyongyang maintained a façade of friendship, the relationship became increasingly cold. Ultimately, Kim Il-sung solidified his control, ensuring that loyalty to him, rather than to the Soviet Union, became the determining factor in North Korea's political elite. The Soviet community was substantially reduced in size. Those who remained formed a small remnant that persisted for a few more decades before eventually fading away.

The remnant: 1960s–1970s

The continued presence of citizens from the former overlord nation drew the ire of the Kim Il-sung regime. Pyongyang sought to isolate this community and pressure them

[37]Tertitskiy, *Forgotten Political Elites*.

[38]Ye Titorenko, *Zapis' besedy s Nam Mairiyey Avksent'yevkov, zhenoy Nam Ira, chlena Politbyuro TsK TPK*, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, inventory 49, folder 640, 1963, p. 234. Nam Il's wife, a close acquaintance of Titorenko's wife, spoke to her in a brief, impromptu exchange during a hospital visit that was cut short by the sudden approach of another Korean woman.

[39]N. Shubnikov, *Otnosheniye koreyskih ofitsial'nyh vlastey k posol'stvu SSSR i sovetskim grazhdanam, post oyanno prozhivayuschim v KNDR*, 30 October 1970, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 62, item 455, pp. 203–219.

[40]Yuriy Kogay, '*Strana moyego detstva*', in Yuriy Kogay, *Yuk-ko: russkaya srednyaya shkola v Phen'yane* (Almaty: Dominant-ptint, 2019), p. 226.

[41]Kogay, *Yuk-ko*, p. 108.

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into adopting North Korean nationality. As a communist nation, naturalization was entirely managed by the central government through a rubber-stamp legislature, and applications for North Korean citizenship were usually granted almost immediately if Pyongyang deemed the individual desirable.

The policy was elaborate and quite effective. The Soviet embassy was struggling to maintain contact with its citizens: the DPRK refused to provide them with addresses, censored letters, often failing to deliver them, and prevented Soviet citizens from accessing their own embassy.[42] This patterned almost exactly the Stalin-era playbook: in the late 1930s, Soviet security agencies treated foreign embassies as hostile outposts; approaches to an embassy were watched, logged, and could precipitate detention.[43] By applying this practice to its own foreign-born residents, Pyongyang localized a Soviet tactic: severing outside channels of information and making any approach to an embassy so risky on a personal level that doing so became virtually impossible.

By the late 1960s, only one child from the community, the son of a North Korean military officer and a Soviet woman, still attended the embassy school—despite Pyongyang's ongoing pressure on the boy's parents.[44] Moscow's hands were tied by its overarching policy of avoiding any actions that might provoke Pyongyang, a delicate balancing act intended to prevent North Korea from aligning itself with China. Ambassador Sudarikov was explicitly instructed on this matter by Premier Kosygin himself.[45]

Soviet citizens were subjected to a number of discriminatory measures. Their spouses were often demoted or even fired. The amount of food and goods provided to them by the state was limited compared to DPRK citizens.[46] There were a case of no food stamps being issued for nine months to a Soviet woman and her children.[47] Subscribing to Soviet periodicals was banned as was using radios that could theoretically be tuned to receive Soviet broadcasts.[48] At mandatory ideological meetings, they

[42]K. Kostyunin, *O nekotoryh voprosah konsul'skoy sluzhby v sovetsko-koreyskih otnosheniyah*, 2 April 1975, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 68, item 1866, pp. 58–65; V. Tribunskiy, *O polozhenii sovetskih grazhdan, postoyanno prozhivayuschih v KNDR*, 12 September 1976, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 69, item 2420, pp. 85–87; *Iz dnevnika Kapustina D.T. Zapis' besed s sovetskimi grazhdanami, prozhivayuschimi v KNDR. Iyun'-sentyabr' 1969*, 13 October 1969, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 61, item 466, pp. 167–171; R. Savel'yev, *O rezhime prozhivaniya inostrantsev v KNDR in yego prakticheskom primemenii k grazhdanam SSSR i tret'ih stran*, 15 June 1970, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 62, item 452, pp. 88–92.

[43]'The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Kirk) to the Secretary of State. 31 August 1938', in *Office of the Historian*, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1933-39/d511, [accessed 26 January 2026].

[44]Interview with Dmitriy Kapustin, a former Soviet diplomat who served in Pyongyang in the late 1960s. February 2020, Moscow.

[45]Ibid.

[46]K. Kostyunin, *O nekotoryh voprosah konsul'skoy sluzhby v sovetsko-koreyskih otnosheniyah*, 2 April 1975, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 68, item 1866, pp. 58–65; V. Tribunskiy, *O polozhenii sovetskih grazhdan, postoyanno prozhivayuschih v KNDR*, 12 September 1976, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 69, item 2420, pp. 85–87.

[47]Iz dnevnika Shubnikova N. M., *Zapis' besedy s zamestitelem zaveduyuschego I departamenta MID KNDR Pak Si Gvonom*, 4 May 1970, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 62, item 461, pp. 77–82.

[48]V. Tribunskiy, *O polozhenii sovetskih grazhdan, postoyanno prozhivayuschih v KNDR*, 12 September 1976, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 69, item 2420, pp. 85–87.

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had to listen to harsh denunciation of their homeland: the DPRK slammed the USSR for 'embourgeoisement'.[49]

Educated Soviet citizens were banned by the DPRK from working in a field in which they had received education, instead being sent to do hard physical labour.[50] In some cases, this was punishment for perceived disloyalty. In a telling case, when O I Gyk,[51] a Soviet Korean engineer, stated he wanted to leave the DPRK for the USSR, not only was his request denied, but he was demoted.[52]

The discriminatory system extended to families as well. In rare cases where the couple consisted of a Soviet man and a North Korean woman, Pyongyang allowed them to leave the country.[53] However, in the more common scenario of a Soviet wife and a North Korean husband, Pyongyang insisted that they divorce[54]—or, at the very least, demanded that the wife become a North Korean citizen.

Spouses of Soviet citizens were likely to be severely demoted[55] and the children of Soviet citizens were nearly completely banned from receiving higher education,[56] and subjected to psychological pressure.[57] There were cases reported of Soviet children being harshly beaten in school by their Korean teachers.[58] Unmarried Soviet citizens were denied requests to marry and told that their marriage could only be registered should they adopt DPRK citizenship.[59]

[49]Iz dnevnika Volkovoy L.V., *Zapis' besedy s grazhdankoy SSSR, postoyanno prozhivayuschey v KNDR Ti Yekaterinoy*, 19 April 1973, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 66, item 682, pp. 81–83.

[50]Iz dnevnika Shubnikova N.M., *Zapis' besedy s zamestitelem zaveduyuschego I departamenta MID KNDR Pak Si Gvonom*, 4 May 1970, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 62, item 461, pp. 77–82; V. Tribunskiy, *O polozhenii sovetskih grazhdan, postoyanno prozhivayuschih v KNDR*, 12 September 1976, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 69, item 2420, pp. 85–87; N. Shubnikov, *Otnosheniye koreyskih ofitsial'nyh vlastey k posol'stvu SSSR i sovetskim grazhdanam, postoyanno prozhivayuschim v KNDR*, 30 October 1970, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 62, item 455, pp. 203–219.

[51]This name is transliterated from Russian as the man was a Soviet citizen and clearly desired to be perceived as such. If transliterated from Korean, his name would have likely been O Ŭiguk or O Ŭigŭk.

[52]V. Tribunskiy, *O polozhenii sovetskih grazhdan, postoyanno prozhivayuschih v KNDR*, 12 September 1976, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 69, item 2420, pp. 85–87.

[53]Interview with Dmitriy Kapustin.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Iz dnevnika Volkovoy L.V., *Zapis' besedy s grazhdankoy SSSR, postoyanno prozhivayuschey v KNDR Ti Yekaterinoy*, 19 April 1973, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 66, item 682, pp. 81–83.

[56]V. Tribunskiy, *O polozhenii sovetskih grazhdan, postoyanno prozhivayuschih v KNDR*, 12 September 1976, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 69, item 2420, pp. 85–87.

[57]N. Shubnikov, *Otnosheniye koreyskih ofitsial'nyh vlastey k posol'stvu SSSR i sovetskim grazhdanam, postoyanno prozhivayuschim v KNDR,* 30 October 1970, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 62, item 455, pp. 203–219.

[58]Ibid.

[59]R. Savel'yev, *O rezhime prozhivaniya inostrantsev v KNDR in yego prakticheskom primemenii k grazhdanam SSSR i tret'ih stran*, 15 June 1970, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 62, item 452, pp. 88–92.

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The purpose of the suppression was to make Soviet citizens renounce their Soviet nationality and pledge allegiance to the DPRK and Kim Il-sung.[60] Discriminating against those who did it was substantially relaxed.[61]

The DPRK's legislation was structured to facilitate this goal. The Citizenship Law of 1963 (Article 4, Paragraph 2) stipulated that children of mixed couples born in the DPRK would automatically acquire DPRK citizenship.[62] Meanwhile, the Soviet Union's 1938 Citizenship Law did not address this issue,[63] and, as mentioned above, the 1957 Soviet-North Korean treaty prohibited dual nationality. As a result, it was virtually impossible for children born in the DPRK to claim Soviet citizenship without visiting a Soviet embassy—and that was hardly possible at all. A new Soviet Citizenship Law adopted in 1978 did little to change the situation. Article 12 of the law stated: 'When parents have different citizenships, one of whom was a citizen of the USSR at the time of the child's birth, if both parents had permanent residency outside the USSR at that time, the citizenship of the child born outside the USSR is determined by the agreement of the parents.'[64] Without access to the embassy, this provision, once again, effectively prevented parents from applying for Soviet citizenship for their children.

Thus, after the exodus of the late 1950s and more than a decade of Pyongyang's active efforts to push the remaining community to naturalize, the number of those who still retained their Soviet passports became very small. A 1970 report of a Soviet diplomat assessed it as 110 people, six of them being ethnic Russians.[65] Four years later, an internal document of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave a number two times lower—53 people as of late 1974.[66] Only 34 of them were within the embassy's reach, as contact with the remaining 19 had been lost.[67] Pyongyang actively continued to try to annihilate the community completely. As of 1 September 1976, the community was assessed as comprising 41 adults, of whom only 15 were in permanent contact with the embassy. The fate of another 15 was completely unknown to the Soviet diplomats. and the remaining 11 were prevented from visiting the embassy by the North Koreans.[68] A

[60]N. Shubnikov, *Otnosheniye koreyskih ofitsial'nyh vlastey k posol'stvu SSSR i sovetskim grazhdanam, postoyanno prozhivayuschim v KNDR*, 30 October 1970, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 62, item 455, pp. 203–219.

[61]V. Tribunskiy, *O polozhenii sovetskih grazhdan, postoyanno prozhivayuschih v KNDR*, 12 September 1976, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 69, item 2420, pp. 85–87.

[62]'*Chosŏn Minjujuŭi Inmin Konghwaguk Kukchŏkpŏp*', *Rodong Shinmun*, 10 October 1960, p. 1.

[63]*Zakon 'O grazhdanstve Soyuza Sovetskih Sotsialisticheskih Respublik', Sovetskaya Sibir'*, 26 August 1938, p. 3.

[64]*Zakon Soyuza Sovetskih Sotsialisticheskih Respublik 'O grazhdanstve SSSR', Vedomosti VS SSSR*, no. 49, 1978, p. 816.

[65]N. Shubnikov, *Otnosheniye koreyskih ofitsial'nyh vlastey k posol'stvu SSSR i sovetskim grazhdanam, postoyanno prozhivayuschim v KNDR*, 30 October 1970, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 62, item 455, pp. 203–219.

[66]K. Kostyunin, *O nekotoryh voprosah konsul'skoy sluzhby v sovetsko-koreyskih otnosheniyah*, 2 April 1975, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 68, item 1866, pp. 58–65.

[67]Ibid.

[68]V. Tribunskiy, *O polozhenii sovetskih grazhdan, postoyanno prozhivayuschih v KNDR*, 12 September 1976, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 69, item 2420, pp. 85–87.

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similar number—42—was given in the embassy's yearly reports for 1977[69] and 1978.[70] The latter report also mentioned the fact that 34 of the 42 people were ethnic Koreans and that 31 members of the community resided outside Pyongyang. All reports duly mentioned the fact that the Soviet citizens were facing severe restrictions from the North Korean authorities in accessing the embassy.

One could draw parallels here with North Korea's policy towards another community—the citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC). When in the late 1960s the Sino-North Korean relationship sharply declined and became nearly openly hostile, citizens of the PRC in the DPRK were faced with a trinary choice: permanently leave the country for China, switch one's nationality to become North Korean, or be cut from the state system of distribution of goods and face the prospect of starvation. The Chinese community was destroyed much faster than the Soviet one, although in China's case this was not permanent: after Zhou Enlai visited North Korea in 1970 and both sides resumed reasonably good relations, forcibly naturalized ex-Chinese were permitted to restore their Chinese nationality.[71]

The last ones: 1980s–2020s

By the final years of the Brezhnev era, the two-decade-long period of strained relations between Moscow and Pyongyang had come to an end. Facing a rapidly opening China, Kim Il-sung, who had long been critical of these reforms, chose to shift his favour towards the Kremlin. As had happened earlier with Chinese nationals, this Soviet-North Korean détente led to better treatment of Soviet citizens in North Korea, as the pressure on them was significantly eased. However, by this time the Soviet community had already been greatly reduced in size, and unlike Beijing, Moscow did not push Pyongyang to restore the citizenship of those who had lost it.[72]

The end of the Soviet Union created additional hurdles for the community. After the USSR was completely dissolved in December 1991, no post-Soviet state bestowed citizenship unconditionally on all former Soviet citizens residing outside of the former USSR. In the case of Russia, one needed to be either born on the territory of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) or have at least one parent who was a citizen of the USSR permanently residing on the territory of the RSFSR at the time of the child's birth.[73] In other words, this clause excluded all DPRK-born Soviet citizens from having Russian (or any other post-Soviet) nationality. The only people left with a foreign nationality were those born in the Soviet Union who had been taken to North Korea as children.

Tellingly, a leaked 2005 database of North Korean citizens in Pyongyang contained only one entry (among several million) where the person's ethnicity was listed as

[69]*Politicheskiy otchyot posol'stva SSSR v Koreyskoy Narodno-Demokraticheskoy Respublike za 1977 god*, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 73, item 1510, p. 44.

[70]*Politicheskiy otchyot posol'stva SSSR v Koreyskoy Narodno-Demokraticheskoy Respublike za 1978 god*, Russian State Archive for Contemporary History, collection 5, folder 75, item 1105, pp. 51–52.

[71]Wang Yonggui, '*Chaoxian jiyi*', *Qiaoyuan*, no. 160, October 2013, pp. 68–69.

[72]Interview with Georgy Toloraya, a Soviet and Russian diplomat stationed in Pyongyang in 1978–1980 and 1984–1987. January 2025, Seoul (online).

[73]*Zakon Rossiyskoy Sovetskoy Federativnoy Sotsialisticheskoy Respubliki 'O grazhdanstve RSFSR'*, State Archive of the Russian Federation, collection 10026, folder 1, item 576, pp. 46–60, https://statearchive.ru/1085

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'Soviet' (*Ssoryŏn*), and none as 'Russian' or any other major ethnicity of the former USSR.[74] The woman listed as Soviet was said to have been born in North Hamgyŏng province in 1967. It may be that she was a Soviet citizen who had lost her nationality in 1991, leading to such an unusual entry.

Ultimately, the Russian community in North Korea dwindled to just two people: Matryona Kim and Vladimir Lee.[75] By 2018, Vladimir was the last living Russian citizen in the country.[76] Born to a Soviet mother and a North Korean father, he had stayed behind in Korea after his mother returned to the USSR, while his father had passed away. As a child born on Russian soil, he retained Russian citizenship after the Soviet Union collapsed.

This author once met an escapee from Wonsan who had known Vladimir Lee. She shared that Vladimir's sons—both Russian citizens—had left North Korea for Russia, confirming that Vladimir had truly become the last of his kind.[77] His unique status granted him the rare privilege of visiting the Russian embassy in Pyongyang during Russian elections, where he cast his vote in the 2018 presidential election[78] and participated in the 2021 election of the State Duma.[79]

But by 2024, the embassy no longer mentioned Vladimir, and in 2025, a Russian diplomat formerly stationed in Pyongyang confirmed to the author that Vladimir Lee had passed away.[80] The circumstances of his death remain uncertain, though the pervasive threat of Covid-19 in North Korea, with its low vaccination rate,[81] suggests that it may have claimed him. With his passing, the story of the Soviet/Russian community in North Korea came to a quiet and sorrowful end.

Analysis and comparisons

North Korea's policy towards Soviet citizens—blocking or filtering embassy access, pressuring them to naturalize, and criminalizing continued ties with a foreign state—was not created in isolation. It closely mirrored practices entrenched in Stalin's USSR towards permanent foreign residents. Embassies were fenced off by security surveillance, visits could lead to interrogation or arrest, and long-term foreign residents were encouraged, deceived, or forced into taking Soviet citizenship, after which any contact with foreign missions was branded as espionage.[82] Dual loyalties were systematically eliminated through both law and practice. These were the very tools Kim

[74]Leaked database of Pyongyang residents, compiled by the DPRK's Ministry of People's Security in 2005. Microsoft Access file in author's possession.

[75]Interview with Georgy Toloraya.

[76]Embassy of Russia to the DPRK, *Lyubov' ne znayet granits*, 28 January 2018, https://www.facebook.com/RusEmbDPRK/posts/727407877433004, [accessed 26 January 2026].

[77]Interview with a former North Korean citizen and Wonsan resident, 15 March 2018, Seoul.

[78]Ibid.

[79]Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Vybory deputatov Gosudarstvennoy Dumy v Posol'stve Rossii v KNDR*, 21 September 2021, https://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/kp/1777524/, [accessed 26 January 2026].

[80]Interview with Georgy Toloraya.

[81]Sung-mok Jung and Jaehun Jung, 'The Possible Impact of Nationwide Vaccination on Outcomes of the COVID-19 Epidemic in North Korea: A Modelling Study', *Journal of Korean Medical Science*, vol. 37, no. 41, 2022, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9592938/pdf/jkms-37-e300.pdf

[82]'Memorandum Prepared in the American Embassy in the Soviet Union. 24 June 1948', in *Office of the Historian*, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v04/d597, [accessed 26 January 2026];

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Il-sung employed in consolidating power. The institutional link was clear: Pang Hak-se, founder of the DPRK's security apparatus, was Soviet-born, Soviet-trained, and had a career within Stalin's system.[83] When in the 1960s and 1970s Pyongyang barred Soviet citizens from freely entering their own embassy and tied relief from discrimination to the renunciation of Soviet nationality, it was using a Stalinist repertoire to address a local problem—the removal of uncontrollable, externally connected constituencies within a personalist state.[84]

The story of the Soviet community in North Korea stands out as being quite unusual among the many other stories of minority groups. First, their unique status has little to do with race, ethnicity, language, or faith. Most of the members were ethnic Koreans (there are no reports of any of the permanent residents struggling to speak Korean) and as the population was either atheist or non-religious, religion was also not a contributing factor. Neither were wealth (the community never directly controlled any part of the DPRK's economy besides personal possessions) or political representation (both the USSR and the DPRK were authoritarian states in which people had no say in governance).

Indeed, the only criteria to separate the members of the community from the rest of the DPRK public was their citizenship. Being a Soviet citizen meant several things—one was not conscripted into the armed forces, one could not join the Workers' Party, or make a meaningful career, but one could, at least theoretically, leave the DPRK for good (although O I Gyk's story mentioned earlier in this article shows that it was not always possible).

None of this looked particularly dangerous. It seems, however, that the DPRK was bothered by another right of Soviet citizens—the right to visit their own embassy in Pyongyang. From the late 1960s, Kim Il-sung moved to establish a truly autocratic state, aiming to control all parts of the society.[85] Even a small group who could visit the diplomatic office of a foreign power and have an uncensored conversation with the Soviets was not something the state was willing to tolerate. It is also possible that the state's motivation stemmed from a desire for total control over every facet of society, with any exception—such as citizens of a foreign power—becoming perceived as a potential threat. Thus, Pyongyang strived and ultimately succeeded in destroying the community.

If one were to seek comparable cases, two examples emerge as particularly relevant. The first is the Chinese community in North Korea. Much like the Soviets, they were citizens of a powerful socialist state residing in a smaller, authoritarian ally. Their treatment mirrored the state of relations between Pyongyang and Beijing. Until the

Nicole Atwill and Peter Roudik. 'Immigration Laws from the 1940s: France • USSR', *The Law Library of Congress, Global Legal Research Directorate*, August 2004. LL File No. 2004-1138, https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/llglrd/2019669808/2019669808.pdf

[83]Tertitskiy, 'Pang Hak-se', pp. 82–99.

[84]On Stalinist precedents, see 'The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Kirk) to the Secretary of State. 31 August 1938', in *Office of the Historian*, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1933-39/d511 and 'The Secretary of State to the Chargé in the Soviet Union (Grummon). 24 July 1939', in *Office of the Historian*, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1933-39/d720, [both accessed 26 January 2026].

[85]Sŏng Hye-rang, *Tŭngnamu chip* [A Wisteria House] (Seoul: Chisik Nara, 2000), pp. 312–317; Kim Chingye, *Choguk—ŏnŭ Puk Chosŏn inminŭi sugi* [The Motherland: Notes of One of the North Korean People] (Seoul: Hyŏnjang munhaksa, 1990), vol. 2, pp. 79–80.

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mid-1960s, they enjoyed a privileged status, with both governments offering them support. However, as relations soured between the two states in 1965–1966, they were forced to either leave or adopt North Korean citizenship. Those who refused either option were all but ejected from the state distribution system, effectively left to starve. Yet, unlike their Soviet counterparts, they experienced a reversal of fortune. When North Korea and China normalized relations in 1970, former PRC citizens were allowed to reclaim their nationality. In a twist of fate, their status as a distinct community was strengthened during North Korea's devastating 1990s famine, as their right to travel to China enabled them to establish trade networks and rise to economic prominence.[86]

The second case study takes us to a state arguably the closest to Kim Il-sung's North Korea: Enver Hoxha's Albania. Like Kim, Hoxha survived de-Stalinization in 1956 and purged reform-minded officials from the Central Committee.[87] In a few years, Tirana severed ties with Moscow. The diplomatic break in 1961 left behind a community of Soviet citizens—primarily Soviet women married to Albanian men—who had chosen to remain. With the USSR now branded an enemy, these women found themselves living under the unrelenting scrutiny of the Sigurimi, Albania's feared secret police. Expressing even mild dissatisfaction, such as complaining about high prices, could result in immediate arrest and decades of imprisonment. Their survival as a community hinged on the fall of Hoxha's regime, and with the collapse of Albanian communism in 1992, they were finally free from persecution.[88]

Comparing these three cases, a pattern emerges. All three communities were composed of citizens of a major communist power residing in a smaller, hyper-authoritarian ally. Their fate was directly tied to the state of relations between their homeland and their host country. When relations were good, they were left alone or even granted special privileges. When ties soured, they became subjects of suspicion and repression.

In the end, one might argue that the Soviet community in North Korea was the unluckiest of the three. The Soviet-Albanians were freed with the fall of communism, and the Chinese-North Koreans suffered only a brief period of systemic persecution before regaining their foothold. But the Soviets in North Korea endured two decades of repression due to the 'hidden split' between Moscow and Pyongyang, stretching from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. Already a small group, their numbers dwindled further with the collapse of the Soviet Union, as there was no newly emerged post-Soviet state willing to champion their cause. And so, with no lifeline left, the community faded into history.

[86]Fyodor Tertitskiy, 'Exclusion as a Privilege: The Chinese Diaspora in North Korea', *The Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, Spring 2015, pp. 177–199; Wang Yonggui, *Chaoxian jiyi* [Reminiscences on North Korea], *Qiaoyuan*, vol. 160, October 2013, pp. 68–69.

[87]Ana Lalaj, *Pranvera e rrejshme e'56-s* (Tirana: INF BOTUES, 2016).

[88]Sergey Zharkih, '*Russkiye zhenschiny zhdut vozmescheniya moral'nogo uscherba ot Albanii*', *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 25 March 2008, https://www.rg.ru/2008/03/25/albania-zhenschiny-anons.html, [accessed 26 January 2026].

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Conclusion

The story of the Soviet community in North Korea is one of slow erosion, a tale of individuals caught in the shifting tides of Cold War politics and authoritarian control. What began as a presence deeply intertwined with the foundations of the DPRK gradually became an anomaly, an inconvenient remnant of foreign influence that Pyongyang sought to erase. Over the decades, Soviet citizens in North Korea—whether advisers, officials, or ordinary people—were subjected to increasing isolation, coercion, and, ultimately, disappearance as a distinct group. Those who remained were forced to make tough choices: renounce their nationality, sever ties with their homeland, or endure relentless pressure from a regime that had little tolerance for even the smallest pockets of external allegiance.

Unlike other expatriate communities in socialist states, the Soviet diaspora in North Korea was not simply a minority group; it was a reminder of a past that Kim Il-sung wished to overwrite. The logic of a personalist dictatorship demanded that there be no divided loyalties, no alternative sources of information, or authority beyond the Supreme Leader. And so, one by one, Soviet citizens of North Korea were absorbed into the rigid structures of the state, their foreign ties severed, their histories either rewritten or erased altogether. Even in the final years of their existence, when diplomatic relations between Moscow and Pyongyang warmed, there was no concerted effort to preserve or restore their identity. By the time the Soviet Union itself vanished, so too had nearly all traces of its people in North Korea.

The fate of the last remaining members of the community speaks volumes about the nature of history's quiet endings. There were no grand moments of closure, no formal acknowledgments of their contributions or suffering—only a slow dwindling, a fading away into obscurity. Vladimir Lee, the last Russian citizen in North Korea, lived out his last years as the sole survivor of a community that had once numbered in the thousands. His passing marked the end of an era, closing the final page of a story that had begun with the Soviet occupation of the northern half of the Korean Peninsula in 1945.

In the broader sweep of history, the Soviet presence in North Korea was fleeting, yet its erasure was deliberate and absolute. It was a reminder that even those who once shaped a nation's birth can be written out of its memory when their existence no longer serves the ruling ideology. The Soviet community did not fall in one dramatic event, nor did it face a singular moment of reckoning. Instead, it was gradually suffocated by policy, by time, and by a relentless demand for absolute loyalty. In this sense, North Korea did not innovate so much as adapt a Stalinist repertoire—surveillance of foreign ties, denial of embassy access, and pressure to renounce outside citizenship—to erase a community whose very legal status kept a crack open in the regime's wall of total control, and to raise it to a level that surpassed even Stalin's. In the end, these people left behind only a faint trace in the archives, a handful of scattered testimonies, and a poignant lesson in the impermanence of political alliances and the fragility of those who find themselves caught between them.

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