

July 20, 1956

**Memorandum of Conversation with the head of the
department of construction materials under the
DPRK Cabinet of Ministers, Li Pil-gyu.**

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Summary:

Li Pilgyu holds a frank conversation about Kim Il Sung's inner circle, and where their loyalties lie. Kim Il Sung's cult of personality has created a dangerous political and social atmosphere.

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From the diary of
Charge d' Affairs ad interim
USSR in the DPRK
Petrov A.M.

The meeting took place in the Embassy at the initiative of Li Pil-gyu [Li Pil Kyu]. At the beginning of the discussion Li explained the following about himself.

From the age of 16 he took part in the revolutionary movement in China. Later, he illegally came to Korea where he continued his underground revolutionary work. When in his twenties, he was arrested by Japanese gendarmes and sat in prison for 12 years.

After the liberation of Korea by the Soviet Army he worked as the head of the department of state security under the Soviet military administration. During the period from 1948 to 1950 he studied in the Party College under the CC CPSU. After returning from Moscow he worked as the deputy director of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army, and later commanded the 6th Army. From the army he was sent to the Ministry of the Interior in the capacity of first deputy minister. At one time he carried out the duties of the Minister of the Interior. He worked for a long time with Pak Il-u [Pak Il U] and knows him well.

Further, Li Pil-gyu said that in connection with the Pak Il-u affair, he was 'sacked' from the organs of the Ministry of the Interior and sent to the Ministry of Chemical Industry as the head of administration, and later as deputy minister.

At the present moment he was working as the head of the department of construction materials.

Li claimed that he wanted to express candidly his thoughts on the leadership of the KWP and government, i.e. Kim Il Sung.

Li said that he did not learn about Kim Il Sung only until the 1930s when he, Li, was in prison. Li, emphasized with much indignation that at the present moment, the history of the struggle of the Korean people for their liberation was being distorted. Li claimed that at the present moment the staging of an opera called 'solgaegol' was under way in which one part showed the liberation of political prisoners by the partisan army. This, according to Li, contradicted reality. The Soviet Army freed political prisoners. Further, Li declared that it is being legitimized at the present moment that allegedly, 'Gwangbokhe' (the Society for the Restoration of the Homeland) was in fact an early form of the Communist Party of Korea. Supposedly this was completely untrue. That was a falsification of history. 'Gwangbokhe' was a society of the democratic front. It is Li's opinion that the revolutionaries located in Korea worked completely independently, without the influence of Koreans located during that period in China. He said that right up to 1936 the Comintern, Kim, and the Profintern directly sent people and directives to Korea. In his opinion, if 'Gwangbokhe,' organized by Kim Il Sung, a member at that time of the Chinese Communist Party, really played a large role in the revolutionary movement in Korea, then the Comintern should have concerned itself with that organization through the Communist Party of China. But that just didn't happen.

Further, Li touched on the problem of the personality cult of Kim Il Sung.

Li Pil-gyu said that the personality cult of Kim Il Sung took on an intolerable

character. He did not tolerate any criticism or self-criticism. The word of Kim Il Sung was law. He had surrounded himself with sycophants and lackeys in the Central Committee and Council of Ministers. It would be enough to say that of 18 ministers, 9 of them have a shadowy past. To this number is related, according to Li, the Minister of Metallurgical Industry, Gang Yeong-chan [Kang Yong Chan], the Minister of Light Industry, Mun Man-ok [Mun Man Ok], the Minister of Chemical Industry, Li Chang-ho [Li Chang Ho], Chairman of the State Planning Committee, Li Chang-ok [Li Chang Ok], Minister of Education, Han Seol-ya [Han Sol Ya], and others. To the Korean people, nothing was known of their struggle in the past for freedom and the independence of Korea. Li Pil-gyu said further that at the present moment an extraordinarily difficult atmosphere had been created. The CC was spreading distrust between functionaries.

Functionaries followed one another. There was absolutely no trust and friendship between functionaries in the CC KWP and Council of Ministers. In his opinion, a group of officials consider it necessary to undertake certain actions against Kim Il Sung and his closest associates at the earliest possible opportunity.

In response to my question about what exactly those actions would consist of, Li answered that the group set before itself the task of replacing the present leadership of the CC WPK and government. In his opinion, there were two ways of doing this. The first way – that is sharp and decisive criticism within the Party and self-criticism. However, Li said, Kim Il Sung would likely not be in favor of that way and he doubted the success of such an approach. The second way was forcible upheaval. That was a difficult path, Li said, involving sacrifice. In the DPRK there were such people who can embark on that course and who were currently making appropriate preparations.

To my question if he could name any from that group, Li evaded answering.

I asked him, in his opinion, who from among the leadership respectfully displayed himself in work. Li gave the names of Choe Yong-geon [Choe Yong Gon] and Choe Chang-ik [Choe Chang Ik].

Choe Yong-geon, Li said, had recently demonstrated dissatisfaction with the activities of Kim Il Sung. Choe Chang-ik – a person with an impressive revolutionary past. If a struggle with Kim Il Sung began, then he would stand on the side of his opponents.

To my question what position Li took in connection to the above-mentioned underground group, Li again evaded answering, but from the tone of his comments, I have surmised that he plays a significant role in that group.

I asked Li what the objective of that information was and he answered that it comes from the desire to alert the Soviet embassy to the fact that there was a possibility of one or another development taking place in the DPRK.

Regarding the life of the masses, Li explained that 80% of the population of Korea consisted of peasants. After the liberation of Korea, peasants were given everything possible for a better life, but they lived very badly. The government carried out improper fiscal policy. Instead of 23-27%, more than 50% of tax in kind had been practically seized from the peasants. At present, this policy was continuing. There was nothing to say about the methods of collecting tax in kind in 1954-1955. The collection was accompanied by beatings, murder, and repression. On the spot party work was based not on persuasion, but on violence, the cooperative movement occurred on the basis of violence. Workers lived very poorly; there was not enough cereal and soy. The intelligentsia and students lived under very difficult conditions. In the opinion of Li Pil-gyu, the Party had to admit sincerely its mistakes in front of the peasant masses; honestly tell them that times are very tough. At the same time [it

should] tell them about the prospective future. At the present moment they wrote in the newspapers and announced on the radio only one laudatory remark; that everything was fine in the DPRK. That was an improper method of operating.

Regarding individual members of the Party leadership and government, Li Pil-gyu said: Kim Du-bong [Kim Tu Pong] was not a Communist before and the Chinese Communist Party did not pay much attention to him. In general he was very quiet, industrious, but aware of his position. He would not blindly follow Kim Il Sung.

Choe Yong-geon was not with Kim Il Sung. They were together only in the USSR. Choe Yong-geon had a brilliant revolutionary record. By rank he was higher than Kim Il Sung. Choe Yong-geon was a person with his own intelligence. He had recently demonstrated dissatisfaction with several of Kim Il Sung's activities.

Kim Il – Kim Il Sung's protégé. He will always side with Kim Il Sung.

Pak Geum-cheol [Pak Kum Chol] – he was a young worker. It would not be worth promoting him too high at all.

Pak Jeong-ae [Pak Jong Ae] – she would be content with the present situation since she was afraid of her past. Many have doubts as to why the Japanese allowed a person who graduated from a Communist college in the Soviet Union to be left in peace. This means that she pledged to the Japanese not to become engaged in revolutionary activities.

Choe Chang-ik – a person with a revolutionary past and independent wit. If a struggle against Kim Il Sung ensued, he would come to the side of Kim Il Sung's opponents.

Pak Chang-ok [Pak Chang Ok] – he still had a lot to do to make up for his faults. He was the very first to name Kim Il Sung irreplaceable, praising him to high heaven. He was the founder of the personality cult of Kim Il Sung.

Pak Ui-wan [Pak Ui Wan] – a good person. He possessed good qualities in his work, had authority among the leading functionaries.

Kim Chang-man [Kim Chang Man] – he was the most hateful person. He persistently demanded shooting Pak Il-u.

Han Seol-ya – he should be shot. He should be put away for his one book “History.” He was a very ghastly, injurious man. A Kim Il Sung sycophant.

Li requested that I consider the contents of our conversation strictly confidential and not, under any conditions, inform the Korean leadership of them.

The discussion lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes. The translator of the discussion was the embassy interpreter, Kim Du-bong.

Charge d' Affairs ad interim
USSR in the DPRK /Petrov A.M./