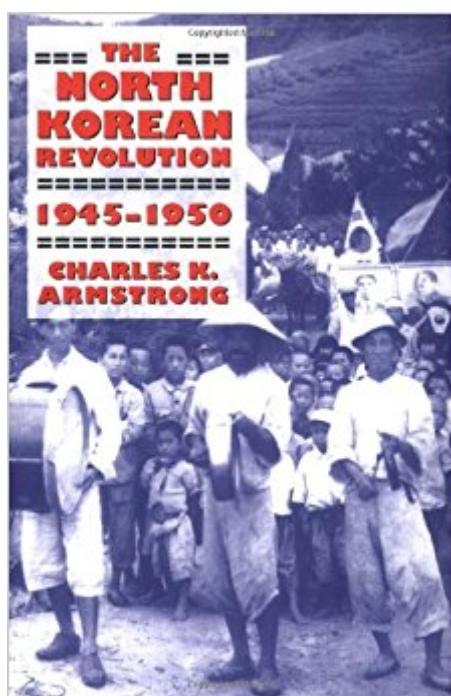


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# The North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950 (Studies Of The Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University)



## **Synopsis**

North Korea, despite a shattered economy and a populace suffering from widespread hunger, has outlived repeated forecasts of its imminent demise. Charles K. Armstrong contends that a major source of North Korea's strength and resiliency, as well as of its flaws and shortcomings, lies in the poorly understood origins of its system of government. He examines the genesis of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) both as an important yet rarely studied example of a communist state and as part of modern Korean history. North Korea is one of the last redoubts of "unreformed" Marxism-Leninism in the world. Yet it is not a Soviet satellite in the East European manner, nor is its government the result of a local revolution, as in Cuba and Vietnam. Instead, the DPRK represents a unique "indigenization" of Soviet Stalinism, Armstrong finds. The system that formed under the umbrella of the Soviet occupation quickly developed into a nationalist regime as programs initiated from above merged with distinctive local conditions. Armstrong's account is based on long-classified documents captured by U.S. forces during the Korean War. This enormous archive of over 1.6 million pages provides unprecedented insight into the making of the Pyongyang regime and fuels the author's argument that the North Korean state is likely to remain viable for some years to come.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

"In a world where the kind of Marxist-inspired, state-directed development embodied by Soviet Russia has long since been discredited as ineffective, the North Korean economy and state

management continue to resist the forces of the North Korean people. Armstrong wants to explain this rather counterintuitive longevity of a state whose like can be found nowhere else in the world except in Cuba. . . . This work will be indispensable for anyone hoping to understand the postwar history of Korea and East Asia."çChoice "Armstrong has carefully gone over all of the newly available documents on the founding of the North Korean regime to ask why Pyongyang, in spite of the appalling suffering of its people, remains one of the last holdouts of 'unreformed' Marxism-Leninism."çForeign Affairs "Charles K. Armstrong takes advantage of new archival materials to rethink the history and character of North Korea. In considering the critical years of North Korea's development prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, Armstrong's *The North Korean Revolution, 1945ç1950*, delivers some surprising, heterodox conclusions."çJohn Feffer, *Korean Quarterly* "Charles K. Armstrong's *The North Korean Revolution, 1945ç1950* is a pioneering work. . . . This eye-catching book offers a wealth of factual information on the genesis of the North Korean state. It introduces a unique comprehensive perspective for the analysis of postcolonial Korean modernization, communist state formation, and creation of new imagined national and social identities and communities in the North. It is a new classic in Korean studies and a must-read for all aspiring students of Korean history and Korean affairs."çAlexandre Y. Mansourov, *Journal of Asian Studies* "This book provides a wealth of factual information and historical background that increases the reader's understanding of North Korea's communist history and present idiosyncrasies."çJeffrey J. Kuebler, *Military Review* "Charles K. Armstrong has written a unique account of the North Korea's domestication of communism. *The North Korean Revolution, 1945ç1950* is an outstanding book."çDae-sook Suh, *University of Hawaii* "In *The North Korean Revolution, 1945ç1950*, Charles K. Armstrong shows conclusively for the first time that a revolutionary social, economic, and political upheaval occurred during this period, and that important ideological and policy conflicts defined the power struggles for control of the new state."çSelig Harrison, author of *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement*

Charles K. Armstrong is the Korea Foundation Professor of Korean Studies in the Social Sciences, Department of History, at Columbia University. He is the author of *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950ç1992* and *The North Korean Revolution, 1945ç1950*, both from Cornell, and *The Koreas*, editor of *Korean Society: Civil Society, Democracy and the State*, and coeditor of *Korea at the Center: Dynamics of Regionalism in Northeast Asia*.

When the history of North Korea is discussed, the focus is usually on the division of the peninsula, the installation of a pro-Soviet regime, and the application of communism. But Charles K. Armstrong went far beyond this approach in this work. Armstrong went through several aspects of North Korean society, touching upon even art, to show how the government's authority and ideology touched upon every aspect of daily life and every imaginable segment of society. To his credit, he highlights the communists' significant overturning of traditional Korean classes, as the communists placed the peasantry on top. A sound work free of political bias which examines what the North Koreans did between August 14, 1945 and June 25, 1950, in their attempt to revolutionize their half of the peninsula.

A great read for the understanding of what might have been. When you read this work, you begin to comprehend what America was trying to prevent in Vietnam. You also realize that if the NVA and Vietcong had not prevailed, we'd be dealing with two North Koreas today. Ron DiGiovanni Easton, PA

Completely by coincidence, I finished this book one day after the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950. It is an appropriate coincidence, however, since Armstrong (who completed the first version of this study as his dissertation under Bruce Cumings at the University of Chicago) lays out the development of North Korea as an increasingly separate state and society right up to the eve of the war. In Armstrong's description, "Korea's sudden liberation from Japanese colonialism in 1945 created an enormous space for politics, releasing a cacophony of contesting voices claiming to represent Korean society" (p. 47). Armstrong traces the early development of several of those voices, eventually narrowing his focus to Kim Il Sung and the people surrounding him--primarily allies from his days as an anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter in Manchuria. Indeed, one of Armstrong's purposes is to demonstrate that the experience of living and fighting in exile in the hinterlands of China had far more to do with shaping Kim's thinking and politics than any adherence to a Soviet-inspired system. He convincingly demonstrates that the development of North Korean politics, society, economy, and culture in these five crucial years immediately after Liberation were a combination of the legacy of colonial rule, influence from the USSR and China, and a bedrock of enduring Korean culture. Especially valuable is Armstrong's extensive use of North Korean documents captured by US forces during the Korean War--an enormous archive which scholars have only begun to mine. Armstrong concludes that Kim Il Sung gained power not because he was anointed by the Soviet Union but because he skillfully manipulated internal political alignments and

understood the strength of Korean nationalism. He rose to power through internal politics, and could only be recognized and supported, not selected, by the USSR. Equally important, he shows that for all its outward adherence to many of the forms of a Soviet system, in its content the North Korean state developed essentially as a nationalist, and not a Soviet-internationalist, construction. It remains so today, dependent still on the rhetoric of external threat, a unitary people and culture, and the need for a strong leader to manage the constant crisis. It is a very good study, and did much to enhance my understanding of this crucial period.

In *The North Korean Revolution 1945-1950*, Charles K. Armstrong argues that North Korea was not simply the result of an externally imposed communist system strictly controlled by the Soviet Union - and that Kim Il Sung was not a hand-picked Soviet puppet. Instead, he argues that North Korea, though created under the umbrella of the occupying Soviets, developed a uniquely Korean form of communism forged from the experiences of the various Korean communist groups that returned or re-emerged after liberation. Throughout the book, Armstrong strives to demonstrate the uniquely indigenous Korean aspects of the social formation of North Korea into a communist state - particularly those that contrast the Soviet national model and the type of socialism imposed more strongly on the Eastern European states. Armstrong begins his argument by discussing how socialist endeavors at land reform in Manchuria amongst the large populations of ethnic Koreans directly influenced subsequent land reforms in North Korea after Soviet occupation. Armstrong uses this one example to illustrate that an indigenous communist movement not only existed in theory in colonial Korea, but also actually put their theories into practice amongst the ethnic Korean population of Manchuria. Armstrong also notes that this nascent Korean communist movement, that existed to a limited extent within Korea and also in other countries where Koreans emigrated to or fled, was neither created nor controlled by the Soviet Union. In fact, when Soviet forces occupied North Korea, they had no known communist groups with which they had contact. Also, Armstrong makes the claim that the Soviets did not necessarily plan on creating a communist state in the North - only a state that would be friendly with the Soviet Union and open up its economic resources. Further, the various communist groups that eventually poured back into Soviet-occupied Korea did not all have the same agenda and competed amongst each other for influence. Armstrong also strongly emphasizes in this book that Kim Il-Sung was not the hand-picked puppet leader of the Soviet authorities, but was rather a leader of one of the several returning communist factions who had to compete for his ultimate leadership of the North. After making these significant points in his argument, Armstrong spends the rest of the book demonstrating how the communism that

developed in North Korea from 1945 to 1950 was more a result of both traditional Korean Confucian traditions and the complex influence of oppression under and resistance to the Japanese colonial system than a result of an implementation of Soviet-style socialism. Armstrong also notes that North Korea had no real exposure to Western liberal ideals since it moved "directly from neo-Confucian monarchy to Japanese colonialism to Stalinism virtually without a break (6-7)." Finally, Armstrong shows throughout his book, and especially in the last few chapters, the influence of the anti-Japanese struggle on the formation of North Korea's unique brand of communism. With the rise of Kim Il-Sung's Kapsan guerilla faction to power, their experiences of continuous and desperate struggle against an almost omnipotent Japanese surveillance and security force directly informed their own policies of continual mass mobilization for war and the development of a widely-pervasive national surveillance infrastructure. Armstrong bases his argument primarily on his research of North Korean documents covering the period 1945 to 1950 captured by American forces during the Korean War. According to Armstrong, more than 1.6 million North Korean documents are currently stored in the United States National Archives. While the use of these captured documents provides a level of insight and detail impossible to obtain from sources within North Korea itself, there are limitations to using these types of documents as primary sources. First of all, having been written by North Korea communists themselves, these writings undoubtedly strive to portray the Korean communists as having a great amount of political autonomy from Soviet occupation authorities - if for no other reason than nationalistic pride. Armstrong himself notes in his appendix on sources that he did not use any Russian-language sources from the same time period. This is a shame, since these documents could just as well have supported his argument - but they may also have contradicted it by revealing a more powerful and influential occupational authority than envisioned by Armstrong. Therefore, Armstrong has probably painted an overly optimistic portrait of the "North Korean Revolution." But, this criticism aside, this book is a worthy addition to the library on modern Korean studies. I respect Armstrong's willingness to challenge traditional wisdom on the formation of the North Korean state and the true value of this book is found in this challenge. However, his reliance on captured North Korean documents as his primary source, without contrasting Russian-language sources from the same period, weaken his overall argument of the purely indigenous nature of North Korea's development into a communist state. With this said, I believe that Armstrong successfully demonstrated that North Korea was not simply a Soviet-created and supported puppet state - but he did not demonstrate well from his sources that, beyond just being there and allowing nascent communism to flower, that the Soviet Union did not have a more direct influence on the style of communism that developed in the young North Korean state.

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