Peripheral Influence: The Sinŭiju Student Incident of 1945 and the Impact of Soviet Occupation in North Korea

Adam Cathcart and Charles Kraus

This article examines the North Korean city of Sinŭiju during the era of Soviet occupation, focusing specifically on the Sinŭiju incident of 23 November 1945. A violent clash between local youth and Communist security forces, the incident revealed the combustible mixture of factors present in postcolonial North Korea. The Soviet military government’s deadly response to the protests seriously threatened Korea’s receptiveness to the Korean Communist Party and to the Soviet Union, and forced stronger control over both the city of Sinŭiju and youth nationwide. This article considers the visit that Kim II Sung (Kim Il-sŏng) made to Sinŭiju in the aftermath of the incident, as well as subsequent North Korean policies in Sinŭiju. Drawing on previously untapped files from the Archive of Military History of the Russian Federation, newly declassified CIA documents, and Korean- and Chinese-language texts, this article examines a North Korean city whose peripheral influence in the postcolonial period has not yet been adequately understood.

For the port city of Sinŭiju (located in what is now North Korea, or the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, DPRK), the twentieth century brought transformation and trauma. At a pivotal location along the Amnok (Yalu) River, which connects Korea to Manchuria, the city expanded into a symbol of Japanese ambitions. Then Sinŭiju’s moorings and signature bridges were nearly obliterated by U.S. bombs in November 1950, as American generals, under the oversight of Douglas MacArthur, assumed that the city would again be the default capital for rulers fleeing Pyongyang (P’yŏngyang). After its encounter with the U.S. military, Sinŭiju was flooded with Chinese People’s Volunteers, Chinese military aid,
and war refugees on their way to China. Following the Chinese exodus in 1958, the city accelerated through Ch’ŏllima-style economic campaigns and rebuffed Maoist radicalism during the Cultural Revolution. Today, perched at the edge of the relative wealth of the Chinese Dandong, Sin’ŭiju remains an important center of trade with the People’s Republic of China. There is much—largely fruitless—speculation about its potential as a free economic zone that might revive North Korea’s moribund economy.

Amid these powerful cross currents of historical change, the Soviet occupation of Sin’ŭiju from 1945 to 1948 has received relatively little attention. In the months following the August 1945 haebang (liberation) from Japan, Sin’ŭiju was a major testing ground for Korean Communism. As Korea’s most populous northwestern port city, Sin’ŭiju embodies the story of North Korea’s formation, including the process of political consolidation. Sin’ŭiju rapidly became a site of heated interaction between nationalists and Communists, and, perhaps more than any other northern city outside of Pyongyang, influenced the direction of North Korea’s eventual shift to Communism. As events in Sin’ŭiju unfolded in Korea’s postliberation milieu, it became clear that Seoul and Pyongyang were not the only centers of significant political activity and change. Just as instability in the Chŏlla provinces and Cheju Island stimulated profound changes in South Korean and American policy in 1948 and 1949, North Korea was beset by peripheral influences.1 Likewise, North Hamgyŏng Province, particularly the port of Ch’ŏngjin, was unsettled by autonomous forces that required serious attention from the northern authorities.2 In studying North Korea’s foundations, peripheral areas provide important case studies for the impetus of Kim Il Sung’s (Kim ’Il-sŏng’s) centralization of power.

Soviet influence in these areas also bears examination. Documents produced by the Soviet military occupation government in Sin’ŭiju and North P’yŏng’an Province reveal the powerful overlay of nationalism and anti-Soviet sentiment present in North Korea after August 1945.3 These documents indicate that while the Red Army worked arduously to forestall outbreaks of anti-Soviet resistance, the Soviet Union did not always successfully mitigate the concerns of the Korean people. Soviet influence has been useful in understanding the extent of Soviet activities in the north during this formative period. An extensive Soviet influence, without fully ascribing these to Soviet influence. Self-mobilized Koreans in North P’yŏng’ang Province, especially students, worked at cross-purposes with the Soviet occupation authorities and the new Communist government. No better example of this opposition exists than the central event of Sin’ŭiju’s history in the years under consideration. The Sin’ŭiju student incident of 23 November 1945.


Several important historical works have referenced the Sin’ŭiju incident, but few scholars have dedicated more than a couple of pages of writing to this bloody event in early North Korean history. Robert Scalapino and Chong-sik Lee reduced the Sin’ŭiju incident to a lengthy footnote in volume one of their Communism in Korea, including at least one error.4 While Bruce Cumings limited the event to a one-sentence footnote in the first volume of his Origins of the Korean War, it merited a whole paragraph in the body of the second volume.5 Given that Christian students were involved in the revolt, a number of Christian scholars and organizations have followed Cumings’s precedent in emphasizing the role of Christianity in the Sin’ŭiju incident.6 Unfortunately, the works of this group are rife with error.7 Sŏ Tongman’s recent survey of North Korean history from 1945 to 1960 is immense and comprehensive, but the text mentions Sin’ŭiju only twice and fails to address the November 1945 episode in detail.8 Kim Hayŏng’s works, and their translation and analysis by Owen Miller, shed light upon the origins of the Sin’ŭiju incident while reframing the Soviet occupation more generally.9 The best-known South Korean treatment of the incident resides in the Ch’ŏngju Ilbo’s oft-cited Pirol Chosin minjusek’il inmun konghwa kŭk (Secret History of the DPRK).10 While the interviews in the Pirol text are useful for reconstructing the outbreak of protests, the book lacks reference to Soviet documents and shows little concern for documents in English or Chinese that further contextualize the incident. Histories of the Sin’ŭiju incident published in South Korea during the Park Chung-hee (Pak Chŏng-hui) years remain of great interest, but their content is difficult to disentangle from the larger purpose of discrediting the current North Korean government.11 While North Korean histories discuss the incident, they have limited use since they follow the line laid down by Kim Il Sung in his 27 November 1945 analysis of the event.12 The most credible and extended English-language treatment of the Sin’ŭiju incident appears in Charles K. Armstrong’s The North Korean Revolution, centering on Kim Il Sung’s response to the event. Armstrong, however, omits the role of Christianity and telescopes the incident into “a student protest” that merits only four cursory (though illuminating) pages of writing.13 No known English-language text has yet focused upon the Sin’ŭiju incident and its aftermath as an episode in Korean history worthy of extended treatment. Nor have scholars done much to detail the specific Soviet actions and policies that provided the background to the civil strife (or as the North Koreans call it, “the revolt”) that occurred in November 1945. This article seeks to fill the gaps by showing how the violence in Sin’ŭiju both shook the Soviet occupation of North Korea and imperiled the personal rule of Kim Il Sung. What led to the student uprising of 23 November 1945?

SOVIET OCCUPATION

On 16 August 1945, the residents of the port city of Sin’ŭiju awoke to a whirlwind of change—the Japanese had capitulated. As yet unrestrained by an Allied occupying army, and receiving cooperation from Japanese administrators suddenly eager to curry favor, Korean elders emptied the colonial prison and established an autonomous provisional committee (wŏn’gŭn) to regulate local affairs.14 The committee, composed mainly of conservative nationalists, succeeded in establishing
order without the aid of a police force, and by 25 August was exerting control over the entirety of North P'yongan Province. For two weeks following Japan's surrender, Sinuiju's residents were masters of their own affairs. But, as in southern Korea, the appearance of Allied troops would bring with it heavy impositions.

The entrance of Soviet troops into Sinuiju on 30 August jeopardized the autonomous committee and shattered its ability to exert control over the province. The Red Army, confronted by town elders who had deep political roots among North P'yongan citizens, immediately dissolved the wimwónhoe and redirected provincial political energies by sponsoring a new People's Political Committee (PPC) that privileged Communist leaders over conservative nationalists.

The Soviets began the occupation with a rather open attitude toward religion and religious parties, advocating a tolerant line in interest of stability. But when partisan disagreements emerged among the Koreans, Soviet policy toward churches was reevaluated. After the wimwónhoe was dissolved, on 9 September a number of Presbyterian pastors in Sinuiju responded by organizing the Christian Social Democratic Party (CSDP). Soviet military analysts rapidly branded the nearly one thousand members of Sinuiju's newest political party as part of the "bourgeois social stratum" and believers in the political platform of "the landlord class." In early October the party dropped "Christian" from its name and, under Soviet pressure, merged with the Chosón Minjudang (Korean Democratic Party, KDP), led by charismatic Christian spokesperson and political leader Cho Mansik.

While Christian nationalists operated as political competitors, the Soviet authorities also faced inevitable friction with Korean landlords. Aware of the connection between landlords and the KDP, the Red Army, in its internal discussions of land reform, anticipated that problems would arise when agricultural social systems in Sinuiju and North P'yongan Province were restructured. While much of the land had yet to be redistributed before spring 1946, farmers under Soviet protection, pushed toward a steady erosion of landlords' social stature and standard of living. As one of the most historically conservative sections of Korea, the area around Sinuiju was home to many disaffected landlords, who encouraged Korean youth to protest the Soviet occupation and land reform. Tensions between farmers and the landed elite—an exacerbation under the Japanese colonial system—would not be easily resolved in North P'yongan.

Political change promoted unrest, but the region's social instability most clearly arose from acute agricultural problems. One Soviet report from early October 1945 reveals the depth of grain shortages in North Korean cities, noting that struggles against local landlords had disrupted grain production at harvest time. Red Army administrators further stated that their troops' claim to foodstuffs was exacerbating Korea's hunger and heightening tension between the Soviets and urban intellectuals. Following this rather frank self-assessment, Soviet administrators convened meetings in Pyongyang on 9 and 10 October, in which both Korean farmers and intellectuals discussed the region's agricultural problems and the sensitive issue of feeding the Red Army. (Although the parallel is not extended in Soviet documents, it is possible that some Koreans likened Soviet actions to the feverish Japanese export of Korean rice at the height of the Pacific War.) Other economic difficulties associated with the Soviets, including the plunder of factories and poor railroad transport, gave Sinuiju residents more reasons for agitation.

In fall 1945, Soviet documents stated that "reactionary forces" were using the economic difficulties as "justification for opposing the Red Army, the Soviet Union, and the local democratic parties," distributing leaflets, and otherwise "terrorizing" local authorities. In this environment, no issue was so explosive as that of food. In Sinuiju the price of rice had tripled from 30-40 won to 110 won per mali under Soviet occupation. Rumors circulated through the city that the Soviets were set to expropriate more rice stocks from the surrounding countryside.

At the first "winter of victory" set in upon the Korean Peninsula, democratic and Communist parties continued to clash in Sinuiju via conflicting propaganda. Pro-Soviet messages were broadcast by local radio and printed in publications; city streets, public parks, and backyards were frequently littered with leaflets dropped from Soviet aircraft. Working at cross-purposes, city churches maintained their activities within the city limits and moved to extend influence into the political realm. Conservative nationalists and Christian leaders alike effectively used church pulpits to publicize political content, while a South Korean Christian radio station known as Tongyang Pangsong (Far Eastern Broadcasting) was reportedly accessible to those tuned in on the northwestern Sino-Korean border. Into this environment, the Soviets sent an army captain named Grafov from Pyongyang to investigate Sinuiju's ideological terrain. His 13 November 1945 report characterizes prevalent trends in the city's newspaper market, and does so with some alarm. Noting that Sinuiju had only two newspapers, Grafov critiqued the irregularity of their appearance, noting that "the People's Committee has published 19 issues [and] the Communist Party has published none."

Complaining that he was "unable to examine" the newspapers because of a lack of capable translators, the captain recommended that newspaper journalists in the city should have frequent meetings where they turned over "all of their writings" to censors for approval. By mid-November, the People's Committee newspaper had become the only regular publication on Sinuiju newsstands, but even its contents were not always strictly controlled by the Soviets.

In early November 1945, commemorations of the high ideals of the Bolshhevik Revolution were juxtaposed in Sinuiju against serious breaches of discipline among the rank-and-file of the occupation army. A Red Army report investigating the situation in Sinuiju, dated 13 November 1945, described soldiers' violations of all manner of military laws, including those forbidding public drunkenness and robbery. The report drew attention to the rise of venereal disease within the Red Army ranks in Sinuiju, and noted that although twenty-two soldiers had been arrested for visiting a local brothel, such visits were difficult to prevent.

In Soviet-occupied Harbin, the Red Army resolved similar disciplinary problems by executing the offenders and blaming their deaths on Japanese renegades. If
in fact the Soviets employed such techniques in Sinlui (and it appears they did not), they were unable to staunch the flow of incidents in the city. In the face of Soviet misbehavior between mid-September and mid-November 1945, the apparent complicity of the local Korean Communist party administrators galled Sinlui citizens, building momentum toward an eventual confrontation.

Growing restlessness in North P'yongan was further aggravated by the Red Army's suppression of Korean troops returning from China. In October 1945, an estimated two thousand Korean Volunteer Army (KVA) veterans arrived in Andong. Sinlui's Chinese counterpart directly across the Yalu River. These Korean troops had begun their journey in Shenyang the day after Japan's capitulation, and thousands of Koreans had flocked to their standard. Chinese Koreans in the vicinity rapidly joined the KVA ranks as it became clear that the economic and food situation in Soviet-occupied Andong would not improve in the near future.

On 24 October 1945, when the Chinese Guomindang succeeded in pushing the Chinese Communist Party out of Andong City (an act undertaken with the permission of the Soviets, no less) the entry of the Korean forces into Sinlui became more urgent. Kim Kang and Kim Ho, both veterans of the Chinese 8th Route Army, led these two thousand soldiers and directed correspondence with the Russian command across the river in Sinlui, hoping to span the Andong-Sinlui bridge and return home. In mid-November, the troops crossed the bridge and at Bridge and return home. In mid-November, the troops crossed the bridge and at

The arrest of the school principal became the catalyst for a series of bloody and disheartening clashes between students and armed Soviets and Korean Communists.49 But with a series of actions in the towns surrounding Sinlui, this student movement would emerge into the open.

THE INCIDENT

Material conditions, swift social change, and Soviet missteps in North P'yongan Province had set the conditions for student unrest. The direct spark for the Sinlui incident came, appropriately, from a middle school in a small nearby town, Yongamp'o. The town's Susan middle school had been subjected to the same pressures as other schools in the region: it suffered from a lack of teachers, evidence of complicity of the local Korean Communist party administrators galled Sinlui citizens, building momentum toward an eventual confrontation.

While Korean troops from Manchuria likely excited the sensibilities of Sinlui youth, another group that had entered from Manchuria—Japanese refugees—also agitated the students. Many of these refugees were housed in Korean schools in November 1945. Meanwhile, several thousand Japanese students remained enrolled in North P'yongan's 604 schools. Opening schools well after the traditional start of classes in late August, Korean administrators struggled to eliminate Japanese pedagogues and to employ a curriculum sensitive to both Korean nationalism and the needs of Soviet occupiers. Beyond the persistence of the Cold War, the Korean government was concerned with the_BIG_ of the incident and of Korean Communists in general. At this meeting, organized by the students and attended by local citizens, someone suggested that the students meet Yi Yonghilp, the then-chairman of the Yongamp'o Council of People's Commissars, and confront him with the issue of freedom in their schools.48 As he was the best-known local Communist representative, the students did not antici-
pate great results from the meeting. "Without restraints from the armed security force or the Soviet army," recalled one participant, "the students went out to meet Yi Yoaghdp."

When Yi could not be found, a rumor spread that he was running away to Siniliju, prompting "dozens of students to stack up logs on the road to Siniliju and wait."

A farmers' union friendly to Soviet troops and Korean Communists assembled a crowd of about one hundred to disrupt the student roadblock. Wearing headbands and propelled by the sound of drums and guns, the group approached the students "with hammers and clubs in their hands," then wordlessly set upon the students—scions of the bourgeoisie—giving them an "invariable" beating.

After they returned to their homes and classrooms, the injured students appeared determined to escalate their resistance. In Siniliju itself, students looked to the events taking place in Yongamp'o as evidence that a political demonstration was required against the Korean Communists and the new occupying power.

The North P'yongyang Students' Association became active at this time, communicating with local Communists in an effort to broker a compromise. On 22 November, thirteen student executives from the association rode a truck from the headquarters of the Communist Party to Yongamp'o, accompanied by an executive from the Democratic Youth League and a Communist official. Again, the Communists engaged in a strategy of student intimidation. Before arriving at Yongamp'o in the evening, the students were pulled into a farm worker's assembly, after which Soviet police threatened to arrest them. The student association representatives were nonetheless able to set up a secret meeting with fellow students at 1:30 a.m. in a local restaurant, where the latter responded positively to the Yongamp'o students' request for revenge.

The students' growing radicalism can be seen in their determination to revolt, regardless of the actions of a Communist-sponsored inquiry commission. After a few short nighttime hours that may or may not have included sleep, the students' conviction was strengthened by a predawn meeting at the home of Ch'o'e Nakto, executive of the student association at Siniliju's Ch' i Kongp Haksyo (First Technical School). At Ch'o'e's home, the students decided to revolt immediately, delegating specific targets for specific groups of students, a decision confirmed in a final secret conference at a student boarder's house at 10 a.m. on 23 November. Each school's representative decided to take part in the attack.

The swelling ranks, which numbered between five hundred and one thousand and represented a collective body of seven schools, bolstered student leaders' confidence that they could mount a challenge to the privileged power of Soviet and Korean Communists. Christian influence fueled the rapid growth of the movement. The Soviets had tried to prevent Christian pastors from defending the students by disbanding local religious political organizations, but this was not completely successful.

Among the student leaders were Christians such as Chang To'yengan, who in Siniliju had helped to organize a Christian coalition that might ultimately have centered on a charismatic figure such as Ch'o Mansik. With youth from several other schools, the students would protest what they saw as the degradations of the Soviet soldiers and the complicity of the Korean Communists.

A consortium of students assembled at 2 p.m. on 23 November 1945. Carrying both Korean and Soviet flags as cover, they approached the People's Committee's main building. The students then attacked the building. Machine gun fire erupted into the crowd and Soviet soldiers soon joined the Korean Communists in subduing the students, some of whom were armed with rocks. Meanwhile, several student groups had gathered in front of the North P'yongyang's Communist Party Headquarters and the Peace Preservation Bureau, extending the confrontation to three different Communist bureaucracies. Students of Yong Middle School and First Technical School had approached the Peace Preservation Bureau with cheers of "Stalin hurray!" to prevent attacks from guards with machine guns, and, in the words of one participant, "to show that we were not saying we were anti-Soviet."

The cheers for Stalin, however, quickly gave way to a cry of "Charge!" and the students began piling over the wall into the compound. After a short period of physical struggle, Korean and Soviet security forces began firing rifles and handguns into the crowds, dispersing the protestors.

Each school had decided to take part in the attack. The Normal School and Second Technical Schools were delegated the task of striking the headquarters of the Communist Party. One participant in the attack on this facility (in the central-west part of the city) recalls that most of the students were armed with only "stones picked up on the road." This group of students was unhindered by a wall and, shouting, streamed directly to the third floor of the building. The first casualty was a student named Chang Wonlong, who was said to have died when a Soviet officer shot him in the head. With the sound of gunfire, armed security forces rose up from the basement and began beating the protestors with their rifle butts, prompting the students to run from the building. A few students were said to have jumped from the third floor to escape automatic gunfire. Hwang Changha, sixteen years old at the time, remembers that "everyone just ran away as if they were out of their minds." Students later recalled that a Soviet aircraft strafed the student crowds, driving some to seek refuge in the cold waters of the Yalu River.

By the end of the afternoon, the violence had drawn about three thousand people to the streets from both sides of the protest. U.S. intelligence services estimated that twenty-three students died and a number of others were seriously injured, estimates that largely accord with those of two student participants in the movement who later fled to Seoul and headed organizations to commemorate the incident. (These estimates are 15–24 student deaths and 168–350 injuries.) But a Soviet military report—presumably a better source than U.S. intelligence or student refugees—indicates that about one hundred students died in the revolt. This larger estimate is reflected in the work of Scalapino and Lee, as well as that of Erik Van Reen, who all state that seven hundred students were wounded. Regardless of the specific numbers of casualties, the gravity of the protest and its potentially harmful impact on the Communist movement in North Korea should not be minimized.
The local Korean Communists and Red Army soldiers made few immediate efforts to acknowledge the deaths of the students. Aside from one flyer sent out within Siniliju, the Communists directed their energy toward removing all evidence of the incident. In November 1945, Communist authorities removed another Christian leader, Ham Sŏkkŏn, head of education in the Provincial People’s Committee (PPC), and imprisoned him after a severe beating.71 A wave of arrests in the locale ensued, with a credible account alleging that up to one thousand individuals were imprisoned in one day alone. Although most were released within a week—and told by their Soviet captors that only Kim Il Sung’s personal intervention had saved them—the arrests inaugurated a political cleansing in northwest North Korea.72

The date 23 November 1945 came to represent the largest single demonstration of anti-Communist sentiment during the period of “liberation,” revealing underlying social rifts in the nascent proletarian state. Within this context, Kim Il Sung was soon forced to confront an undercurrent of anti-Communist public opinion when he visited the shaken river city.

**KIM’S VISIT**

In an effort to reconcile the region’s youth to unpleasant realities and make his first show of leadership along the northwestern border, Kim Il Sung boarded a Soviet aircraft and flew to Siniliju on 26 November 1945.73 While Kim Il Sung cannot be directly blamed for the outbreak of student unrest, as he has been by several authors, he can be credited, at least in part, for its resolution.74 As students and their families waited nervously, no apology was forthcoming from Kim. For the Communist leader, civil strife could not be tolerated anywhere in North Korea, and obstacles to the state’s economic and social redevelopment had to be eliminated. Siniliju’s strategic position along the Chinese border rendered the recent upheaval all the more serious. The importance of his visit is highlighted in Kim’s official autobiography, which indicates that “local [Siniliju] authorities said only Kim Il Sung could save the situation.”75 Upon landing in the city, Kim posed for a photograph, wearing a Western-style suit and displaying a cunning smile.76 He then proceeded to a series of assemblies at Siniliju schools.

During a meeting with organized student groups on 27 November, Kim addressed the incident. He denounced the bloody collision, and laid down the gauntlet against civil strife: “Shooting between our people is not only a disgrace; it is deeply regretted that such a disturbance took place at a time when all the people should be uniting in the cause of nation-building. The Siniliju student incident reveals that our nation is not yet united.”77 Kim’s rhetoric of unity, though laced with paternal shame, was more likely to appeal to the students than a reproach for having “been misled.” Offering an oblique self-criticism of his party, Kim directed more opprobrium toward the “rogues lurking in the Communist Party and government organs.”78 This is the first recorded criticism of intraparty traitors in his public works. In later years, as he sought to expose various fractional plots to challenge his leadership, Kim would repeatedly mention the negative forces “behind the scenes.”

**Primary sources** that deal with Kim’s arrival in Siniliju are scarce, making it difficult to assess the actuality of his memoirs.79 But it appears that Kim did temporarily soothe tensions and calm the local population. The Siniliju incident appears to have been a catalyst that enabled Kim to fully employ the potent tool of nationalism for use in public talks and propaganda. In his address to Siniliju students, Kim wisely emphasized his anti-Japanese past and even moved to align himself with the adulated Korean fighters who had entered the city from Manchuria in mid-November. In subsequent propaganda aimed at students, Kim stressed his own nationalism and the need for youth to follow his footsteps.80

Kim’s reprimand of those who had been influenced by pro-Japanese elements and anti-Communist educators finds rich parallels in Soviet documents. Nikolai Georgievich Lebedev, major-general in the 25th Army, claimed that the Siniliju incident was soon forced to confront an undercurrent of anti-Communist public opinion when he visited the shaken river city.

**KIM’S REPRIMAND**

Kim’s remarks indicate the presence of dialogue between students and the leader, revealing that, during the meeting, Kim had at least momentarily suppressed his customary volubility. But if the students had indeed told Kim that “they had been misled” into protesting, such a disingenuous response indicates an unwillingness to express legitimate grievances to the new leader in the aftermath of the protests. Recent events, after all, had shown that complaints would be met with further retribution. Kim’s remarks following his return to Pyongyang appealed to a positive conception of a unified Korean nation. As Kim noted: “It is deeply regretted that such a disturbance took place at a time when all the people should be uniting in the cause of nation-building. The Siniliju student incident reveals that our nation is not yet united.” Kim’s rhetoric of unity, though laced with paternal shame, was more likely to appeal to the students than a reproach for having “been misled.” Offering an oblique self-criticism of his party, Kim directed more opprobrium toward the “rogues lurking in the Communist Party and government organs.” This is the first recorded criticism of intraparty traitors in his public works. In later years, as he sought to expose various fractional plots to challenge his leadership, Kim would repeatedly mention the negative forces “behind the scenes.”

**Primary sources** that deal with Kim’s arrival in Siniliju are scarce, making it difficult to assess the actuality of his memoirs. But it appears that Kim did temporarily soothe tensions and calm the local population. The Siniliju incident appears to have been a catalyst that enabled Kim to fully employ the potent tool of nationalism for use in public talks and propaganda. In his address to Siniliju students, Kim wisely emphasized his anti-Japanese past and even moved to align himself with the adulated Korean fighters who had entered the city from Manchuria in mid-November. In subsequent propaganda aimed at students, Kim stressed his own nationalism and the need for youth to follow his footsteps.

Kim’s reprimand of those who had been influenced by pro-Japanese elements and anti-Communist educators finds rich parallels in Soviet documents. Nikolai Georgievich Lebedev, major-general in the 25th Army, claimed that the Siniliju incident and subsequent protests were organized by an underground rightist student organization sent from Seoul to provoke turmoil.81 But the Soviet military government took a more critical line than Kim, suggesting that the Korean Communist Party was leaning too far to the left and had not yet taken steps to ensure cooperation with the so-called bourgeois democratic camp. Soviet sources also indicated that “reactionary lectures”—like those delivered at schools in Yongamp’o—had influenced the students and the democratic party in Siniliju to oppose the Communist Party and the People’s Committee.82 Such analyses blamed the local Communist Party, not the impressionable students.

The most detailed known extant Soviet report on the incident gives an in-depth and somewhat more objective assessment of the origins of the strife in Siniliju. This report blames the Korean Democratic Party for the incident, and states that two or three groups of student instigators from below the 38th parallel had been
sent to Pyongyang and Siniliju to encourage resistance among student populations. The first group, the report noted, arrived in Pyongyang only to be arrested. The group that traveled to Siniliju found at their disposal an already restless and easily provoked population. After assessing the causes of the incident, the report directed several passages directly to students, written from the perspective of a fellow student. This section of the report was apparently intended as the basis for leaflets or educational materials in Siniliju schools. Linking the protest to the Japanese defeat, the document chastises the students in Siniliju for failing to construct an independent nation. According to the report, the clash gravely interfered with nation-building in Korea’s transition period:

Classmates, you must be the persons who study knowledge, not the persons who engage in politics. Those of you who engaged in political adventurism, you suffered a bloody punishment, committing a heinous crime which any responsible society would not accept. It must be pointed out that in New Korea’s transition period, a bloody clash should not occur. You ought not to become the opportunists of false patriotism. Take to the streets and approve of Communism! Whether or not you are present in the struggle for the laboring people’s liberation and whether or not you are a genuine Communist, you should not fear sacrifice.

The people were enslaved by Japan for 36 years, and on August 15 finally won the liberation and began to feel proud and elated. You, however, did not go to [the streets] to construct an independent country, but instead participated in a bloody clash.86

Even though it does not mention the emerging North Korean leader, the language in this document closely mirrors Kim Il Sung’s rhetoric in Siniliju.

To explain why farmers were drawn into the incident, the report diverges from other reports on student-farmer confrontations and asserts that the farmers opted to contain the violence rather than challenge it. In conclusion, the report demands that the students yield to the needs of newly liberated rural communities and express their sympathy with agricultural workers. Such appeals had two outcomes. First, they diverted blame from the Soviets for appropriating grain from the countryside. Second, they strengthened the contemporary case for viewing the social unrest in Siniliju as an outcome of long-standing strife between landlord families and farmers.

**IMPACTS**

The incident in Siniliju inspired similar student protests in Pyongyang and Wesan, making student unrest—and its blatant anti-Soviet overtones—a fact of life for Soviet and Korean authorities in the coming months.87 Taking steps to reverse growing public distaste for Communism, whether Soviet or Korean, Kim Il Sung used the theme of nation-building to demand that students abandon factionalism and merge all youth organizations into a single, cohesive, and disciplined organization under the auspices of the Democratic Youth League (DYL). In Kim’s words, “Just as an army lacking iron discipline cannot win battles, so an undisciplined youth organization is up to no good.”88 Through internal regulation, goals, statistics, and stern advisers, the DYL took steps toward becoming an organization known for its “iron discipline.” The regime’s efforts to mobilize an estimated one hundred thousand North Koreans in Pyongyang on 6 January 1946, at the “Solidarity and Support of the Moscow Conference,” were correspondingly intense, and included the arrest of the Christian political leader Cho Manik.89

Despite “Solidarity and Support” and other internal campaigns, public sentiment opposing the Soviet occupation remained strong in both North Korea and northeast China. On 22 February 1946, a wave of student demonstrations broke out in Chinese cities to protest the Soviet occupation of Manchuria. Triggered by revelations of the secret Yalta accords and probable Soviet involvement in the murder of a Chinese government representative in Fushun, the protests put additional pressure on the Soviets to withdraw from Manchuria.90 As with the Siniliju student protests, a seemingly small spark in the Manchurian coal center of Fushun—itsself a peripheral city—had ignited anti-Soviet indignation. These student protests caused great concern among Soviet administrators in Manchuria and, from the perspective of occupation officials in North Korea, their timing could not have been worse. On 25 February 1946, a report originating from Chongqing briefly alluded to the Siniliju incident. A broken translation, which ended up in the hands of U.S. State Department officials, reads: “On the December of last year a great number of innocent and patriotic Korean students had been killed for no reason in Sinyechow [sic] in North Korea by Russian soldiers and Korean Communists. The details will be published later.”91 As the 1 March 1919 demonstrations in Korea had inspired China’s “May Fourth Movement” of the same year, the above document suggests that swift Korean student resistance to Soviet occupation in Siniliju provided similar impetus for Chinese student protests in spring 1946.

The May First anniversary of the March First (Samil) Movement was approaching. Soviet occupiers in the north, like their American counterparts in the south, faced the significant challenge of how to handle the popular sentiments that the anniversary would inevitably stimulate. Despite intense Korean Communist Party efforts to reinterpret March First as a Bolshevik-led movement, Christian and student rallies, and their accompanying cries for political representation, culminated on 1 March 1946.92 On 28 February, schools throughout Pyongyang were practically empty, as many students stayed away from school in order to voice their opposition to the staged Samil celebrations. After some students were forced to march in a Samil parade, a huge crowd of Christians assembled at a Pyongyang Presbyterian Church to protest. Under the close watch of Soviet soldiers, the crowd lingered until 3 March. Occupation leaders responded to these protests by closing schools for several days and by holding private meetings...
with school principals. Even then, however, students issued statements ignoring Soviet orders. 93

Amid the tension, a report, "Korea Under Russian Regime: Reign of Death, Famine and Chaos," surfaced. Months earlier, in December, the Returned Korean Student League (RKSL) had prepared this report in Chongqing. 94 Before exposing the Siniliju incident and the Soviet "massacre," the league chastised the Korean Communists for abusing Siniliju's population, stealing Japanese goods for private use, and vowing obedience to Marshal Stalin and the Soviet Union. "These Korean communists love the Russian Red flag more than their own Korean National Flag," wrote the students. "These Korean Communists," they repeated, "even defended for the Russians about their plundering of Korean foodstuffs, properties, the raping of Korean women and massacre of Korean students." 95 The Siniliju incident remained a potent symbol, and added to the challenges that both the Soviets and the North Korean regime faced in commemorating March First.

DISCIPLINING AND CONSOLIDATING SINILIJU

For the remainder of the Soviet occupation, special measures were implemented in schools to ensure that organized student unrest would be near impossible in North P'yongan. The educational bureaucracy shuffled letters of reference, autobiographies, investigative reports, and other determining files on teachers—including information on their social class and role under Japanese rule—back and forth from Pyongyang to the frontier province. 96 Because of the paucity of trained and appropriately experienced teachers who were not associated with the Japanese, in 1948 and 1949 several students who had participated in the anti-Soviet demonstrations applied to be teachers. These individuals were expected to explain how their attitudes had changed since the heady days of November 1945. 97 If teachers were to be filtered out and remolded, students would also experience similar drastic changes and undergo the same types of investigations. Accordingly, the DYL was closely watched, with careful attention paid to members' social class and history. 98 This rapid and often undifferentiated absorption of youth and teachers into party organs was performed in the name of security in the wake of the Siniliju incident, but it would later result in problems for the Workers' Party in North P'yongan. 99

Many students would in fact be drafted into the army and trained as Communist soldiers. The Peace Preservation Officers' School was soon formed and the youngest, most able individuals were chosen for enlistment. Upon being selected, the students underwent rigorous daily field training and "thought inspection" conducted by the top Soviet officials. Ch'oe Yonggon, who rose to leadership in the KDP, led the Peace Preservation Bureau Corps Officers' School, fulfilling influential roles across the board of Communist enterprises. 100 Not surprisingly, one section of the Officers' School was stationed in the former Siniliju Commercial Middle School, whose students had participated in the 23 November student movement. The South Siniliju Peace Preservation Corps Officers' School bunched three thousand Siniliju students by the third graduating class. While instruction in military training was primary, political classes stressed the anti-Japanese struggle, the history of the Red Army, and self-criticism. 101 Through rigorous training, many students in Siniliju had been oriented toward Soviet-style military discipline via the poandon (security force) school, founded in Pyongyang in 1945, which diminished any chance of further open resistance.

By spring 1946, Kim Il Sung and the Soviets were actively engaged in organizing youth into various Communist organizations, as Kim railed against what he called the misleading and traitorous behavior of Christian ministers. 102 Siniliju and North P'yongan Province, although now in the background of the nationwide unrest, still produced churchmen eager to disagree with Communist authority. As a result, these areas saw much anti-Christian activity on the part of Korean Communists. In the wake of nationwide church protest movements urging more religious freedom, three churches in Siniliju were reportedly burned to the ground. In nearby Yongung'o, where the Siniliju incident had been sparked, local forces tore a Presbyterian church to the ground, carted it away in pieces, and later executed the church leader. In Uiju, only a short way up the Yalu River, the Methodist church was torched, and its minister forced to tug an oxcart through town carrying the label of "national traitor." 103

A list of requests to Pyongyang from the Soviet military representative in North P'yongan Province called for a counter espionage unit to curb infiltrators from the south in the aftermath of the Siniliju incident. (Whether the need for such a force was real or simply a means to reconcile bad Red Army behavior remains unknown.) 104 When U.S. presidential representative Edwin Pauley visited Siniliju in spring 1946, his Soviet guides, following standard protocol, were not anxious to let Pauley's team speak directly to the people of Siniliju. Perhaps the unbecoming events that had taken place several months earlier in the city made the Soviet guards hesitant to allow any direct contact with local Koreans, particularly the student-workers who were industriously running factory machinery. When Pauley asked about general living conditions, however, one of the Soviets plainly stated that the people were underfed. Food was scarce, workers received less than their mandated ration, and their spouses ate only a portion of the worker's ration. 105 Soon after, American agents in Pyongyang reported that refugees from northwest Korea, some Japanese, were flowing in increasing numbers into Manchuria and South Korea, as food ration problems continued. 106 Pauley's report, despite its preoccupation with economic data, depicts a disheartened and devastated city.

While Pauley's nigh-mandatory bouts with the vodka urged on him by his Russian hosts may have prevented him from engaging the Soviets deeply on the situation in Siniliju, American spies were more diligent. As Soviet military control over Siniliju deepened in 1946 and 1947, documents filed by American spies increased in number. According to these documents, passengers arriving at the Siniliju train
station were routinely inspected; passengers traveling from the Sinŭiju station to Ch'ŏngju underwent three separate inspections. The Pyongyang-Sinŭiju route was even more intensive, with two inspections invariably given before arriving in Sinŭiju, and additional inspections given before and after departure. Public buses in the Sinŭiju area were also seen as likely targets for security inspections and questioning by the poandae, as were the overcrowded vehicles traveling the frequented route to nearby Ŭiju.109 Three Soviet infantry companies, two heavy machine gun companies, one quartermaster company, and one medical unit were reportedly stationed in Sinŭiju. “Anti-Aircraft Rapid Firing Guns” surrounded the city—three on the Yalu River, one at the city’s highest point, and two bordering the coveted Sinŭiju airfield to protect Soviet aircraft. The city had become a highly policed and militarized zone, intended to deter enemy forces, although it was sometimes unclear who the enemy was.110

One final element that contributed to the Sinŭiju incident came from across the border in China. In an order from the Provincial Committee in Andong dating from the week after the Sinŭiju incident, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) noted the ongoing prevalence of Japanese “fascists and special agents” in the area, and spurred on local cadres to make revolution among the mobile masses of Korean and Japanese migrants, a population the CCP saw as critical to “aiding the organization of the North Korean people” across the Yalu.111 Like the North Korean cadre, the local CCP was working hard to overturn present social structures by convincing people of the old pro-Japanese landlords “traitorous crimes.”110 Although exchanges and cooperation among Asian comrades along the Manchurian-North Korean border were fairly intense, the North Koreans remained naturally wary of the Chinese, particularly given the fact that the Soviets maintained that infiltrators had provoked the Sinŭiju incident. The North Korean regime kept a vigilant eye on the Chinese, and grouped them under “external management” along with the Japanese in surveillance files. Over several years, the Korean Communists produced thousands of pages of documentation on Chinese residents in Ŭiju county (kaen) alone.111 Based on such sources, further research on Sinŭiju’s role in the North Korean revolution should certainly consider the Chinese connection more thoroughly.

CONCLUSION

In stark contrast to the spontaneous and raucous protests of November 1945 in the heavily militarized city of Sinŭiju staged an organized celebration in the last week of June 1947. Soviet soldiers and Sinŭiju citizens took joint part in sporting events, parades, and other activities to strengthen Soviet-North Korean friendship and to express gratitude to the Red Army and the Soviet Union.112 From 1947 until 1950, opposition forces were rooted out and remolded, student unrest never resurfaced, and the general populace of Sinŭiju moved toward acceptance of the region’s changed way of life.

The Sinŭiju incident was a pivotal event in the emerging North Korean state’s early history. The persistence of churchmen and students to protest against Communist policy and to provoke open outbreaks of protest in the early months of liberation led the Soviet Union, Kim II Sung, and other Korean Communists to shape their own policies in ways that minimized dissent. As student unrest continued several months after the Sinŭiju incident, the Communists responded by stamping out sources of resistance and redirecting youthful energies. The latter goal influenced Kim II Sung’s rhetoric and drew the young leader out of Pyongyang on his first-ever inspection tour.

The Japanese exodus had created a political vacuum that was too volatile to permit a coalition government north of the 38th parallel. Student and church participation in the Sinŭiju incident, and the distressing aftermath of the protests, offered the first clear evidence that cooperation between Communist and democratic parties was unlikely. Indeed, the Communists’ consolidation of power involved suppressing church influence, revamping the educational system, and building a sustainable youth following.

The Sinŭiju incident also revealed rifts between rural adherents to the revolution and the scions of the landed classes—the student elite—in the early years of the occupation. Similar societal rifts and methods of power consolidation existed in many other Communist states in the early postwar period. The Sinŭiju incident was unique insofar as it provided a test case for Kim II Sung’s leadership and accelerated his use of personalized nationalism.

The Sinŭiju incident did not mushroom into a larger social movement requiring suppression by Soviet tanks (as in Prague in 1948), but the incident nevertheless had a lasting impact into the late 1940s. It stimulated further abortive protests against the Soviets in North Korea, increased tensions surrounding the March First commemorations in 1946, and was clearly instrumental in sparking a patriotic Chinese student movement in neighboring Manchuria that spring. Ultimately, the Sinŭiju incident had its greatest impact in the way it accelerated North Korean state power. Having been imperiled in peripheral Sinŭiju, the Korean Communists went on to place the city within a matrix of discipline whose centralizing power would withstand and outlast even the savagery of the Korean War.

NOTES

139–97; see also United States National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group (hereafter RG) 59, Everett F. Drumright to the Secretary of State, “Transmitting Report of Development of Chijou Island,” 7 January 1949, 895.00/1–749.


3. All Russian documents cited in this paper are from the Archive of the Defense Ministry of the Russian Federation, Moscow (hereafter ADMRF). The authors thank Professor Kim Tonggill, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, for making these documents (and his Chinese translations thereof) available to the authors for research.

4. The authors state that 700 students were wounded in the movement, while most other reports indicate that only between 700 and 1,000 students total took part in the protest. See Robert Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee, Communism in Korea, Part I: The Movement, 1910–1963 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), 336n.


12. North Korean treatments of the incident are hard to find, but the Sinjuju incident is alluded to in the entry for “Sinjuju Broadcasters” in Ch’ŏngjin taebaekwa sajon (Great Encyclopedia of Korea), vol. 15 (Pyongyang: Paekp’al Sa’jon Ch’ulp’ansa, 2000).

18. On the symbolism of 9 September in East Asia, see Ren Jun, Rifl Rajao Da Gel-fan (Great Repatriation of Japanese Prisoners and Overseas Japanese) (Nanjing: Nanjing Chuabashu, 2005), 23–44.


20. The Political Adviser in Korea (Benninghoff) to the Secretary of State, 1 October 1945, FRUS, 1945: The British Commonwealth, The Far East, vol. 6, 1666; USCIRF, "Thank You Father Kim II Sung," 69–70; Kang, Christ and Caesar in Modern Korea, 156. United States National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the Army Staff, Assistant Chief of Staff (G-2), Intelligence Administrative Division, Document Library Branch, "P" Files, 1941–1951, RG319, Box 1862, Intelligence Summary Northern Korea (INSK), 1 December 1945.


24. For confirmation of this statement in a contemporary context, see Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

39. Kim Tonggil writes: "On October 12, 1945, the leader of the pioneer group of the Korean Volunteer Army, Han Cheong, led the pioneer detachment of the KVA to enter the Korean middle school in Sinuiju across Andong and negotiated with the Soviet Red Army. But the latter rejected the entry of the KVA into the North Korea, saying that 'only the presence of the Soviet Red Army rather than any other military forces is in accordance with the international regulation.' Twenty days later the pioneer detachment of the KVA had to return to Shenyang from Sinuiju." (Kim Tonggil, "Re-examination of the Return of the Ethnic Korean Divisions in the PLA to North Korea," unpublished paper.) See also Chungang Ilbo, Pirok, vol. 1, 148–54.


42. United States National Archives and Records Administration, RG319, Box 1860, ISN1, 1 December 1945; Chungang Ilbo, Pirok, vol. 1, 163.

43. More than one thousand Chinese students were also enrolled in the provincial high schools. See "Report Concerning the Situation of Public Education in North Korean Localities," 20 October 1945, ADMRF, F.I, Ustatts, O.43847, D.1, 60–61.


45. United States National Archives and Records Administration, RG319, Box 1860, ISN1, 1 December 1945; Chungang Ilbo, Pirok, vol. 1, 163.


appear unlikely, Soviet documents indicate that only two weeks before 25 November, the local Provincial People’s Committee (PPC) had requested permission to begin the work of clearing complete damaged Japanese planes from Sin’iliju’s coveted airfield. See “Report to Soviet Military Representatives in All Provinces Regarding Deficiencies in Translation Work,” 13 November 1945, 110–12.


69. United States National Archives and Records Administration, RG319, Box 1862, ISWK, 1 December–15 December; and “Special Issue: Sin’iliju Student Revolt,” 25 November 1945, 194.


71. See Kim, Ham Sŏkkŏn p’yonjŏn (Biography of a Korean Quaker), 87–88; Cummings, Korea’s Place in the Sun, 230–31; and Cummings, Origins, vol. 2, 319. For a speech that targeted similar religious leaders in South P’yŏngan, see Kim Il Sung, “Speech Delivered at the First Enlarged Committee Meeting of the South P’yŏngan Provincial People’s Political Committee,” 23 January 1946, Works, vol. 2, 22.


73. Hwang Chaejun’s research has Kim arriving on 26 November and staying until December. See Hwang Chaejun, “Pukhan ’tieyŏngi chido’ yŏng’gu t’albtaeng kwa kinilŏn chungsim t’wŏ” (A Study of North Korea’s ‘On-the-Spot Guidance’ System: Focusing on its Characteristics and Functions), Ph.D. dissertation (Department of North Korean Studies and Unification Policy, Sŏngang University, South Korea, 1999), p. 1 of the appendix.

74. Kim, Ham Sŏkkŏn p’yonjŏn (Biography of a Korean Quaker), 88; Nahm, Korea: Tradition and Transformation, 333.


82. Kim Il Sung, With the Century, 1732.
options of principals (1946, Songnim 1st and 2nd High School and Songnim Girls' School, Hwanghae-do); RG242, SA2005, 8/6, which contains personal histories and autobiographies of junior high school teachers and written opinions of principals (1946, Educational Bureau of Sariwon); RG242, SA2005, 8/7, which contains personal histories, autobiographies, and application of candidates for high school literature teachers (1947, Pyongyang Special City); RG242, SA2005, 8/16, which contains personal histories and autobiographies of teachers and the written opinions of the principals (1949, Chaebyeong High School for Girls); RG242, SA2006, 2/4, which contains personal histories, brief autobiographies, and records of investigation of candidates for teachers of Central Education Leaders' Training School (1949, Ministry of Education); and RG242, SA2006, 2/25, for the "Register of High School Teachers in North Korea" (1950, North Korean Educational Bureau).


101. CREST, Korea Office, "Military Information: Peace Preservation Corps Officers Schools in North Korea," September 1947; and CREST, Korea Office, "Military Information: North Korean People's Army or Peace Preservation Corps Officers Schools."


103. See CREST, Korea Office, "Military Information: Persecution of Christians in North Korea," 2 June 1947, CIA-RDP2-00457R000060040008-3. See also United States National Archives and Records Administration, RG319, Box 1396, G-2 Periodic Reports, USAFIK, Seoul, Korea, Eastern Asia, Operational Intelligence, Glenn Newman, Political Trends #28, 8 April 1946. Newman's intelligence reports from Seoul tend to be more accurate and less hysterical than others also included in the G-2 series.