

**Scientific and Technical Cooperation between the Soviet  
Union and North Korea from 1945 to 1960**

A Research Proposal Presented to  
The Foreign Languages Department

by

**Julia A. Shilkina**

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National Research University Higher School of Economics  
School of World Economy and International Affairs

Academic advisors:

Prof. E.E. Kim

Prof V.A. Dugartsyrenova

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### Abstract

In just 25 years, North Korea (DPRK) turned from a backward agrarian country into a socialist industrial nation with a strong state defense system. An important factor of this successful development of the DPRK was the cooperation with the Soviet Union (USSR) in the economic, scientific and technical aspects. This paper analyses the process of collaboration and assesses the volume, the scope of supplies between the countries. Within the topic, studies of several authors were examined and analyzed. While some researchers (Gryaznov, Karshinov) pay close attention to the fast development of the DPRK throughout the industrial assistance of the Soviet Union, the others (Myeong, Nam) tend to highlight the educational and scientific collaboration which includes personnel exchanges and training. However, little studies are fully dedicated to the contribution of the USSR to the rise of North Korea in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This work is aimed to address the research gap and describe the key points of the USSR – DPRK cooperation. We will perform primary and secondary data collection and use qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The results of the paper may reveal the importance of the USSR's assistance for North Korea in general and become a theoretical base for further research.

*Keywords:* cooperation, North Korea, Soviet Union, assistance, science, technology.

## **Introduction**

The rapid and successful development of the North Korean national economy in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the extent that nowadays it is de facto (but not de jure) one of the nine countries possessing nuclear weapons has received considerable attention all over the world. With the help of the Soviet Union, the largest enterprises in North Korea were restored as soon as possible, production was launched to meet the needs of the country and the scientific and technical experts required for the effective operation of the factories were trained.

Russia is one of the countries where a great deal of attention was given to the role of the USSR in the process of economic growth in North Korea. Since the importance of the assistance of the Soviet Union is usually underestimated in the DPRK due to the ideas of Juche which is state ideology based on self-reliance, the scholars have become increasingly interested in identifying the significance of the cooperation. For instance, some researchers had studied the volume and the scope of exchanges between the countries (Gryaznov, 1966; Karshinov, 1958) and stated that the USSR's industrial assistance was the decisive factor in the successful construction of the material and technical base of socialism in the DPRK.

Some other scholars considered collaboration between the countries not only from the material, but also from the personnel side, which also has had a significant impact on accelerating the development of the DPRK. They have conducted research works about Soviet Koreans who were sent to North Korea in order to contribute to eliminating the economic and social backwardness (Myeong, 2000; Nam, 1975; Seong, 2015).

However, the scientific works reviewed analyze various aspects of collaboration separately, not giving a clear picture of the overall impact made by the USSR. Moreover, Soviet studies on the topic can be characterized by the general ideological orientation due to the historical

conditions of the Cold War, so the question of whether they are biased or not has arisen. Therefore, the aim of this study is to determine and impartially assess the content, forms, volumes of scientific and technical cooperation between the USSR and the DPRK from 1945 to 1960.

To this end, we will employ a multi-method research approach, including qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Content analysis will be applied to gather detailed data about the forms of aid. Quantitative data analysis will be used while working with the archival documents in order to detect the exact volumes of supplies and evaluate the significance of the collaboration between the two countries.

The study may shed a powerful light on the development of North Korea in the context of scientific and technical cooperation with the Soviet Union. The practical importance of the findings is determined by the lack of comprehensive studies dedicated to this topic in the historiography. The results of this study can be used in the development of training courses and manuals on the history of North Korea and the history of relations between the USSR and the DPRK.

### **Literature review**

This research relates to the research area that focuses on the scientific and technical collaboration of the Soviet Union and North Korea from 1945 to 1960. We will attempt to add to the amount of explanatory research on the topic and for this purpose, we will at first focus on the studies of Soviet-Russian scholars (Gryaznov, 1966; Karshinov, 1958; Myeong, 2000; Nam, 1975; Seong, 2015) and then turn to the foreign research works, although the issue is significantly under-researched abroad.

There can be highlighted the two periods in the Soviet-Russian historiography about the issue: the first one is the Soviet period (before 1991), the second one is the modern period (after

1991). The first term had such features as censorship, lack of access to archive materials and ideological bias. As for the second period, it started in the 1990s with the dissolution of the USSR due to greater transparency and opening of classified information.

Most of the studies of the Soviet authors paid attention to the development of the DPRK throughout the assistance of the USSR and tended to evaluate the process and the outcomes of the cooperation solely in a positive way. Thus, Karshinov (1958) notes that the Soviet Union occupied the leading place in the foreign trade of North Korea – the share was about 90%. According to the author, other forms of economic relations between the countries also developed: the USSR rendered enormous technical assistance in the recovery and economic growth of the DPRK.

Glebova (1959) points out that the assistance of the Soviet Union during the recovery period enabled the DPRK to successfully solve financial, technical and other national economic problems, which made it possible to restore the entire industry in the shortest time and develop it further. She also emphasizes that in the DPRK in the 1950s mechanical engineering could not meet the domestic needs of the national economy, so the most of the machines and equipment were imported from the Soviet Union.

The research works of Gryaznov (1966) and Mesheryakov (1971) cover the entire process of the economic growth of the DPRK. Both authors describe the scale and significance of the assistance from not only the USSR but also the other states of the socialist system. To prove how important the received aid was Gryaznov (1966) quotes the speeches of Kim Il Sung where the leader of North Korea thanks the countries of socialism for the contribution to the rapid economic development.

It should be noted that none of the studies mentioned above provide information about the personnel exchanges which also were instrumental in the rapid growth of North Korea. The focus

of the study of Nam (1975) is on how the USSR took part in the training and exchange of scientific personnel with North Korea. The author cites as an example the work of Korean nuclear energy experts in the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research in Dubna (Russia). However, this study does not cover the technical exchanges and aid which means that it also does not address the problem comprehensively.

Furthermore, none of the scholars of the Soviet period have assessed the cooperation impartially mainly because no failures and gaps in the collaboration have been highlighted although they existed. In contrast to the Soviet authors, Bazhanova (1993) states that despite some benefits, the collaboration has brought a lot of negative outcomes for the DPRK. She mentions that the Soviet government secretly aimed to retain control in the east throughout influencing North Korea in a powerful way. Moreover, she provides some evidence that several acts of crime were committed by the Soviet officers on Korean peninsula such as sexual assaults and thefts of the equipment. Nevertheless, she admits the importance of the USSR in the process of restoring the main Korean enterprises and the economy as a whole.

The research works conducted by Myeong (2000) and Seong (2015) are about Soviet Koreans who were sent to the DPRK in order to solve economic and social problems. The authors examine the causes of high illiteracy rates, low educational levels and lack of skills training in the 1940s in North Korea and also provide detailed data about the way the USSR has helped to address these issues. Both scholars extensively cover not only the achievements but also the failures of the Soviet specialists and government. However, taking into account that some of the archive materials were declassified only in the past few years, these studies cannot be evaluated as complete.

As for the studies of foreign scholars, most of them (Mobley, 2000; Walter & Clemens, 2010, 2016) examine the collaboration in terms of the development of state defense system. The

authors highlight that the DPRK has constructed the nuclear bomb with the contribution of the USSR but they do not cover any other aspects of cooperation.

The focus of the other scholars (Armstrong, 2013; Ginsburgs, 1997; Ha, 1982) is found on the development of the relationships between the socialist countries and North Korea in different periods of time. Although the authors admit the importance of the USSR in the economic growth of the DPRK, they characterize these relations by a high degree of instability and fluidity. None of the researchers provides detailed statistical data about the scope of exchanges and supplies between the countries.

Given the enormously huge amounts of supplies and aid from the USSR to North Korea, it is surprising that the technical and scientific cooperation between these two countries has received remarkably little attention even in Soviet-Russian literature.

All the studies reviewed analyze only the certain aspects of the issue, so there are no complex research works on this topic. Thus, the purpose of this study is to extend the knowledge about the forms and volumes of the assistance received by the DPRK and address the research gap by examining the most recently declassified archive documents as well as the old ones. A thorough examination of the data can contribute to a more detailed picture and possibly lead to a new outlook on the research topic. The study will also attempt to assess the outcomes of the cooperation with an open mind and without prejudice.

### **Methods**

This study investigates the content and the volumes of scientific and technical cooperation between the USSR and the DPRK from 1945 to 1960. Hence, with the intention of examining the former question, we employ the mixed-methods research approach which includes both qualitative content analysis and quantitative data analysis.



**Data collection**

In order to collect information, we will use primary and secondary data. As for the first type of information, we will gather statistical data from the archives (such as State Archive of the Russian Federation, Russian State Archive of Economics) and try to analyze not only the documents which were declassified a long time ago but also those which became publicly accessible during the last years. Grounded on the works of previous scholars, mostly Soviet and Russian, (Gryaznov, 1966; Karshinov, 1958; Myeong, 2000; Nam, 1975; Seong, 2015) we will collect secondary data.

**Data analysis**

We will use content analysis regarding secondary data in order to determine the content, forms, volumes of scientific and technical cooperation between the USSR and the DPRK from 1945 to 1960. Then we will attempt to identify the differences in the approaches to the issue of the Soviet and Russian scholars building on their work periods (Soviet or modern). Grounded in the primary data gathered in the state archives, we will conduct quantitative analysis which will complement the information received from the previous researchers.

The mixed-methods analysis of both primary and secondary data will give us the opportunities to assess the collaboration between the two countries and its outcomes at the time of 1960 impartially.

**Scope and limitations**

The scope of the data collection will include detailed information about technical and scientific collaboration between the USSR and the DPRK in 1945-1960. In this study we do not attempt to cover all the aspects of assistance, so the military and financial aid will not be examined as well as the cooperation which took place after 1960. Also the research is bound by the fact that

some of archive documents are still classified, so we will not be able encompass all the agreements and historical facts.

### **Expected outcomes**

The stated purpose of this research is to identify the forms and the scope of technical and scientific cooperation between the Soviet Union and North Korea in 1940-1960. At the same time, we will attempt to impartially evaluate the role of USSR in the development of the DPRK. The findings may have valuable implications to academic knowledge on the relationships between the two countries. The outcomes of this study may be useful for revealing to the academic society, especially abroad, in a statistically proven way the fact how the aid received from the USSR contributed to the growth of North Korean economy in the 1950s.

The perceived outcomes of this study are two-fold. Firstly, this research is expected to be the only complex study on the topic mainly because it covers both material and personnel sides of scientific and technical cooperation. It will provide a strong theoretical base for the further studies which are necessary because even in Soviet-Russian historiography the USSR-DPRK collaboration is under-researched. Secondly, the most recently declassified data gathered in the study will provide the academic society with the novel and more exact knowledge on the issue.

The findings of this research will be presented to the faculty of World Economy and World Politics at National Research University Higher School of Economics and the study itself to the Foreign Languages Department. Upon the conclusive results, the data obtained could be implemented while developing the training courses and textbooks on the history of North Korea and the history of relations between the USSR and the DPRK for the students. Moreover, it can be published in the scientific and popular science journals such as “The Oriental Collection” so that

not only the students could learn about the findings but also the scholars and everybody who is interested in Asian Studies.

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