

YURI V. VANIN

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by

Kee Kwang-seo

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The Review of Korean Studies, in cooperation with *Jeongsin munhwa yeongu* (Korean Studies Quarterly), features interviews with eminent Korean studies scholars worldwide. In this eleventh interview, we introduce Yuri V. Vanin, Head of the Department of Korea and Mongolia, Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He received a Ph.D. in history on the topic of “feudal Korea in XIII-XIV substances.” This interview was conducted by Kee Kwang-seo, Assistant Professor in the Division of Political Science & Diplomacy, Chosun University, whose academic interest includes North Korean history after liberation, Korean War, and North Korean politics. The Board of *The Review of Korean Studies* would like to express its deepest gratitude to Prof. Yuri V. Vanin for graciously agreeing to this interview and to Prof. Kee Kwang-seo for conducting the interview.

Interview Yuri V. Vanin

My Childhood and the Beginning of Korean Studies

Q: Could you tell me about your childhood?

A: I spent my childhood in the extreme North-West of Russia, across the Polar Circle, in the city of Murmansk. My parents were originally peasants from Central Russia. From the end of the 1920s the active industrialization process began in Russia; developing industry and construction needed a large workforce, its major source being the village folk. In 1927 my parents moved to Murmansk which was at that time under construction and rapidly emerged as one of the USSR's most important commercial, economic, and military port centers in the North. I was born in 1930.

My father began as a common construction worker. As an able, hardworking and active person he had a rapid career and after the end of the 1930s, without even having a formal higher education, he worked as an engineer economist in construction organizations attached to the Navy. In the Soviet period, such a fast career track for young people was the order of the day. I was proud of my father who in my eyes was not just an honest and dedicated professional, but an example of modesty, decency, and inborn intellect. My mother was a housewife, always busy with the chores and taking care of us children. I had an elder brother who was killed in action during the war with Germany, and two sisters, both teachers.

As a child, I, like all boys, was not very enthusiastic about learning, was mischievous indeed, but my mother took very strict care to make sure that all her children, including myself, studied well and took a proper road in life. In this she was fully assisted by school and the whole Soviet surroundings. In pre-war times the main life center for us kids was the yard of our apartment block. I was lucky in this sense: all the children of our house formed a good collective, the

elder and smaller kids were friends, played, and went in for sports together, and tried to do something useful for all the residents of the house. In this way the whole of our lifestyle was instrumental in bringing up in us kids a collective spirit and Soviet patriotism.

Q: How was your life during the war? Did you have any particular experience?

A: When war with Germany (1941-1945) began, our family, except father and my elder brother, was, like millions of families from the war-affected areas, evacuated. We spent three years in a small settlement attached to a factory in North Kazakhstan where my sisters and I continued our schooling. Though the settlement was in the deep rear, its population fully shared the concerns and feelings of the war-torn country. Along with the elders we children did our best to assist the army: we donated money for the Defense Foundation, collected metal scrap for the weapons making industry, and helped on the nearby collective farm. In our remote settlement cultural life was vibrant: amateur actors performed, dramas were staged, and movies were shown in the local club. We schoolchildren played an important role in all these activities. The Young Pioneers organization was active in our school, of which I for some time was the leader. In August 1944 when it was clear that the war was nearing its end our family returned to Murmansk.

In 1946 my father was transferred to a significant post in the Navy construction organization located in the Baltic city of Liepaya, in Latvia that at that time was a part of the USSR. There I graduated from secondary school in 1949. Being a senior school student I continued my activities as a chairman of the student committee and a secretary of the school's Komsomol (Young Communist League) organization.

Q: At that time Korean studies research in Russia was unfamiliar to all. What made you decide on Korean studies as your major when you attend University in Moscow?

A: It would perhaps have looked beautiful and romantic if I said that it was my childhood dream to become a Koreanist and that I strove hard to fulfill my dream. But, alas, that was not the case.

I entered the historical faculty of Moscow State University in 1949. Let me remind you that this was the time when the civil war in China was ending.

October 1, 1949 marked the establishment of the People's Republic. Our students and youth, like all Soviet people, were very enthusiastic with the emergence of people's power in Asia's biggest country. Under these circumstances, many of us first year students, including myself, chose Chinese studies as their major. But there was no need of so many China specialists; therefore we were asked to choose something else. Among others, a young university reader, Mikhail Pak, spoke to us. He described to us a country known as Korea, the history and complicated modern development of which deserved research not less than that of China. His argument seemed convincing and, after some thinking, I made up my mind to go for Korean studies. Five of us formed the first Korean studies group in Moscow university.

Thus, in September 1949 I began my Korean studies career. This road was indeed pre-destined for me and now, 55 years later, I thank my destiny for that happy choice.

After my graduation in 1954 I worked for three years as a history teacher in a secondary school in the Moscow region. In 1957 I joined a postgraduate course in the Institute of Oriental Studies. Since that time my life as a scholar has been linked with this institute, one of the world's major centers of Asian and North African studies. My study as a postgraduate student, Ph.D. degree, and then a career in the institute's Korean department where wonderful specialists and friendly people worked have been for me indeed a higher school of Korean studies, as well as a serious school of life.

Situation of Korean Studies in the USSR and Russia

Q: How long have you worked as a director of the Korea-Mongol department in the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences? And did you like working there?

A: I was appointed head of this department in July 1987. Before me it was headed by outstanding scholars and organizers, George F. Kim and Igor S. Kazakevich. At that time it was the department of socialist countries and was staffed by specialists on Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The problems of the Republic of Korea (further abbreviated as the ROK) were likewise researched upon in this department. After the collapse of socialism in the USSR and other countries the structure was reformed and now our department

deals only with Korea (North and South) and Mongolia. We study history, economy, and modern politics of these countries. Our department is not a big one (15 members) but works rather effectively.

Most impressive are, no doubt, the scholars who work in the department. Each has an unique personality and is a specialist in his/her field of study. Contact with them enriches you both as a professional and as a person. As the head I do my best to support and strengthen the atmosphere of friendship and cooperation in the collective. Naturally, some minor collisions do occur, they can happen even in a family, but in most cases the staff of the department is consolidated; its creative life is quite active and this satisfies me most of all.

Unfortunately, the staff is irresistibly ageing, more than a half, including myself, have long ago passed the retirement age (60 years for men, 55 for women in Russia). The last 15 years have witnessed the loss of more than half the staff members working on Korea, mainly because of death. There is practically no influx of new cadres. We veterans have nobody to pass the torch of our knowledge and experience. University graduates now prefer to go for commerce and other private companies and we should not criticize them for such choices. Academic work requires hard labor while salaries are meager, which is unacceptable for young people. Such a situation is not only in our institute, it is the almost the same throughout the whole Russian academic world and this is really regrettable.

Q: Under Soviet Union politics, what level did Korean studies reach? And what contribution did it make to the development of Korean studies?

A: To my mind, Korean studies in the USSR reached a high level and occupied a worthy place in the world. Great significance was attached to education and research in social sciences. This had a positive effect on Korean studies as well. After 1945 in a number of research and education centers, mainly in Moscow and Leningrad, dozens of highly professional specialists worked, and hundreds of books, and thousands of articles and chapters in collective works were published to discuss various problems of Korean history and modern development. I would specially emphasize that since 1959, in-depth research into the economic and political situation of the ROK began. It was initiated by scholars from Institute of Oriental Studies who made a major contribution to this field.

I should admit that the development of Korean studies in the USSR was rather negative. A similarly negative effect was the absence of direct contacts

with South Korean scholars. Nevertheless, the Soviet works on Korea of that period were of a high academic level, were characterized by a wide range of utilized sources and a deep analysis of the processes that took place in Korea in various stages of her centuries-long history. The two volumes “History of Korea from the earliest times to the present day” (1974) summarized the achievements of Korean studies in the USSR and laid the foundation for further development. I dare say that not so many works equal it in the international realm of Korean studies.

As far as I know, in the ROK a number of Russian works have been published in Korean translation. Some of your academic journals featured articles on Korean studies in Russia. In 1999 a big project completed by my colleagues and myself titled “Korean Studies in Russia: history and modernity” was published. I hope it will help the academic community of the ROK to have a better understanding of the development of Korean studies in Russia.

Q: It was thought that the collapse of the Soviet Union caused deterioration in Korean studies. How was the condition at that time?

A: As it is well known, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the haphazard and chaotic transition of Russia from a socialist to a capitalist way of development was responsible for the emergence of many social and political contradictions in the country that led to deterioration of its economic situation. This told heavily on the research sphere, including Korean studies. The present-day Russian government is not paying as much attention to science and research as the Soviet government used to do. Budget funding of research organizations was curtailed drastically. To survive and continue their research activities many institutes have to lease out a part of their premises to various commercial companies, to do work for them contrary to academic interests and so on. The institutes have no money for academic exchanges with other countries, or for procuring books or research materials.

The salaries of the majority of research workers are lower than the official minimum wage, and therefore, they have to look for extra employment, which is, of course, not helpful to their academic activities. It results in a considerable reduction of academic work’s social prestige, which, in its turn, has an adverse effect upon its present state and perspectives for the future. But even this seems to be not enough. Using fund shortages as a pretext, our government now discusses a proposal to close down a significant number of research centers. This

measure will be even more disastrous for Russia's academic potential. All this is fully relevant to Korean studies as well.

Q: George Kim and Fanya Shabshina made a great contribution to the development of Korean studies in Russia. Could you tell me about their academic achievements and contributions?

A: Throughout my life I was fortunate to meet many people of great interest and importance. But among them George Kim and Fanya Shabshina were of primary importance. I loved and respected both of them sincerely, I am full of gratitude to them for their kind and generous attitude towards me and I proudly view myself as their friend and disciple.

I met George Kim first when I was a student. He lectured us on cultural relations between the Soviet Union and North Korea. He admitted me to the post-graduate course, and for a number of years he was head of the department where I worked. He had an outstanding personality from all points of view: a great scholar, a successful organizer, an active public person, and an extremely kind and amiable man. He was the only Russian Korean corresponding member of the Russian Academy of sciences and only his premature death prevented him from becoming a full member. In 1985-1987 he was acting director of the Institute of Oriental Studies and it was only due to the obtuseness of the then party bureaucrats that he was not appointed full director, contrary to the insistent desire of the Institute staff. I am sure that if he had been alive (he died in 1989 at the age of 64) he would have become the indisputable leader of Russian Koreans.

Fanya Shabshina lived in Seoul 1940-1946 where her husband, Anatoly Shabshin, worked in the Soviet consulate. She was an expert on colonial and post-colonial Korea, had a personal knowledge of many of the participants of the Korean national liberation movement, political figures, writers, and artists. She met Kim Il Sung and the child Kim Jong-Il. She began her research career rather late at the age of 40, but managed to contribute a lot. For quite a long time she was the leader of the institute's Koreanists and, one can say, an informal leader of the whole community of Korean studies in the USSR. Many among us, including George Kim, viewed her as a preceptor. She was a strict and wise teacher of the young scholars, took motherly care of her colleagues, and did her best to help everyone be it work or personal problems. The interests of research and the needs of her colleagues were indeed the nerve centers of her life.

Both George Kim and Fanya Shabshina made a great, invaluable contribu-

tion to the development of Korean studies with their books, articles, seminar papers, and media addresses. But let me stress one more aspect of their multifaceted activities. It was due to their initiative and with their active participation that our Institute for a number of years appealed to the supreme party and government bodies of the USSR for the rejection of the unreasonable policy of not recognizing the ROK. And when recognition finally did take place and both countries established diplomatic relations in 1990, it was to a considerable extent thanks to the efforts of George Kim and Fanya Shabshina.

Q: There were many Russian scholars in Korean studies during the past. Please list the most impressive of them you have in mind.

A: Apart from George Kim and Fanya Shabshina I would name Mikhail Pak, Galina Tyagai, Victor Shipayev, Victor Mazurov, Gennadi Gryaznov, Boris Sinytsin, Vadim Tkachenko, Lev Kontsevich, Yuri Mazur, Marianna Nikitina, Roza Jarylgasynova, Boris Pak, and Marina Trigubenko. Among the relatively young colleagues I would mention Alexander Vorontsov, Svetlana Suslina, Vladimir Tikhonov, Sergei Kurbanov, and Bella Pak. I could add some more names; Korean studies in Russia has always had no dearth of worthy scholars.

Let me use this opportunity to inform you and the readers that in 2004 I published a volume titled “Life and labor dedicated to Korea.” It is a collection of papers, written by different authors, on biographies and research achievements of 21 scholars and teachers who in the second half of the 20th century contributed to the development of Korean studies and Korean teaching in our country. Unfortunately, none of these 21 persons are alive now. May this book be a modest tribute of our grateful memory to those who had dedicated their energy and knowledge to studying Korea to promote better understanding and friendship between our peoples.

Q: The socioeconomic condition has been improved in Russia. Then, do you think the academic conditions will also change? How is the current status of Korean studies in Russia?

A: Paradoxically as it may seem, even in the above-mentioned difficult situation Korean studies lives and develops. Suffice it to mention that since the early 1990s up to nowadays, the most approximate number of the books published on Korean studies is around 250, including individual and collective works, collec-

tions of essays and seminar papers, textbooks, and translations from Korean literature, etc. A number of seminars and conferences were held, and many new centers of Korean studies emerged.

This phenomenon may be explained from different points of view. Firstly, it is a reflection of our traditional interest in a neighbor country, and this interest that has grown considerably since the establishment of full-scale relations between Russia and the ROK, as well as due to the complicated process that are current on the Korean peninsula as a whole. Another reason perhaps is that modern Korean studies in Russia is based upon the solid foundation of what has been done by Soviet Koreanists. A number of recently active scholars have entered this academic realm, one in which they have a starting point from which to move further. Additional opportunities for the development of Korean studies were created by the activization of academic contacts with various research centers abroad.

It has to be noted that the important condition for the survival of Korean studies in Russia is sponsorship from the ROK. But for this sponsorship, many publications and seminars would not have been possible. Great assistance is rendered to us by the Korea Foundation along with some other the ROK universities and institutions. Special mention should be made of the Russia-based regional organization "March 1" headed by Reverend Yi Hyon-Kyn. In its multi-faceted activity this organization pays special attention to Korean studies in Russia, and assists us in publishing books and organizing seminars. We are sincerely grateful to all academic and public organizations from the ROK and hope for further support from their side.

Academic Concerns in the Past and the Present

Q: I'm sure you have played a significant role in developing Korean studies in Russia. However, the development by the later generation seems to be slow. Do you think Korean studies can revive?

A: Thanks for your kind estimate of my work; still, my role in the development of Korean studies in Russia should not be exaggerated. Much has been done, but even more and perhaps better should have been done. As head of the department and a scholar with a long academic record, I do my best to help younger colleagues in the most possible way. As I have said, young people do not go for

research now. For example, in our institute two persons have recently completed postgraduate courses on Korea and got their Ph.D. degrees successfully, but one of them chose diplomatic work, and the other found employment in a commercial company. Similar situations exist in other centers of Korean studies here.

We are gravely concerned now that some fields of Asian studies in Russia are nearing extinction now. It would be unfortunate if it happens to the Korean studies school created by the labor of many generations. Nowadays it survives mainly thanks to the efforts of the veterans, who are real enthusiasts of this field, but the young generation is almost absent and it presents us with a rather gloomy perspective of the further development of Korean studies in Russia.

Q: Your major was the history of Goryeo and Joseon about which you wrote three books. What did you try to identify with each of them?

A: Indeed for quite a long time my subject was the socio-economic problems of medieval Korea. I am sure otherwise it would have been impossible to have a correct understanding of the country's history. Researching into these problems I utilized the most important of medieval Korean chronicles, documents, the *Silhak* works. Some of these valuable sources were for the first time introduced to Russian research by me. Of course I used works by modern Korean historians as well. I published a number of works on Korean history, including the three books you have mentioned. I shall refer briefly to them.

The first one, "Feudal Korea in 13th-14th centuries" (1962) was the first Russian book on Goryeo history. In this book I described the main events of the Korean people's long and desperate resistance to Mongol invasion as well as the influence of the latter upon the political and socio-economic situation of the Goryeo state. My major interest was economy and social structure as well as other important processes that facilitated important reforms carried on by the Lee dynasty that came to power in 1392.

The second book was "Economic development in Korea, 17th to 18th century" (1968). Some people here and in other countries are of opinion that Asian societies, including that of Korea, stagnated during the period between medieval and modern times and were pushed to progress by Western impulse only. Far as I am from fully negating the significance of Western stimuli, I nevertheless feel that in Korea, like other countries of Asia, social progress in various spheres of life never came to a standstill. In my book I tried to denote positive changes in the Korean economy of the 17th-18th century and the emergence of capitalist rela-

tions within it, to describe some significant factors that did obstruct socio-economic development of the country.

In my third book, “Agrarian relations of Feudal Korea in the 15th-16th Centuries” (1981), I just returned to the topic with which my first book ended—the reforms carried on at the initial phase of the Lee dynasty. My point was that feudal society was based upon a peculiar system of land property relations and changes in the latter were correlated with a significant transformation of the whole social network. I researched into the agrarian system of 15th-16th century Korea in detail and planned to discuss its subsequent developments in my further book but unfortunately I had to shift to another field of research. Let me add that I did not fully quit medieval Korean studies as I authored the chapters on that period in the above-mentioned “History of Korea from the earliest times to the present day” (volume I) and other works.

Q: Why did you divert your major to current Korean issues?

A: While previously researching into the medieval history of Korea I at the same time studied its modern situation, mainly in the North, as well. I constantly watched the way North Korean historiography reflected political and ideological processes there under the impact of the all-embracing *juche* ideas. When I became head of the department I had to concentrate mainly upon modern problems of Korea which have been and are a major field of the department’s research work. Moreover, nearly all specialists on modern Korea in our institute passed away one after another and I had to take upon myself the responsibility for some fields of study where no scholar remained.

Q: Could you tell me about your current concerns?

A: Due to the above-mentioned reasons I have now to deal at the same time with a number of topics, each deserving a separate and deep involvement. Among them are internal and external factors for Korea’s disintegration, various aspects of the history of the Korean War (1950-1953), changes in the politics and ideology of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), problems of peaceful unification of Korea, and USSR/Russia-Korea relations. Recently the problems of the Russian Koreans have been added to this number. On each of these topics I published works (it will be out of place to list them here) or presented papers in various seminars.

But my major concern is my department. Our staff is not very big but it requires constant attention. I have to facilitate the normal movement of research processes, provide for our plans to be fulfilled in time and in good quality, read and edit my colleagues' works, assist their publications and so on. Moreover I have to participate in many public activities related to Korea. I am vice president of the Russian Society for Friendship and Cultural Cooperation with DPRK; I also take part in the activities of some organizations of Russian Koreans. As you see, it's more than enough work and concern.

Q: How many times have you visited South and North Korea and what was your impression on each of them?

A: I visited North Korea eight times (last time in 2001) and South Korea three times (last time in 1997). Each visit to the North was from one week to one month, each visit to the South was for a few days only (to attend a seminar). Only once in 1997 thanks to you, dear Kee Kwang-Seo, and our mutual friend Lee Sin Cheol, my colleagues and I were fortunate to have a few days of sight-seeing in Seoul. After that I had a number of gracious invitations to visit the ROK from the Korea Foundation and other centers but unfortunately I could not accept them.

As for my Korean impressions, I may summarize them as most colorful and exciting. You have an extremely beautiful country. More than once I have said, and in full sincerity, that if Heaven exists on earth, it is on the Korean peninsula. It is unfortunate that the inhabitants of this heaven are prevented, mainly by some external forces, from fully enjoying whatever their wonderful country can provide for them.

It is difficult for me to compare the North and the South as my capacities to observe them differed. I may just note that concerning architecture, dress, and people's behavior the North is more traditional while the South is more Americanized. But both parts abound in good and generous persons with all qualities peculiar to the Korean people. To me, the main Korean wonder is the children—joyful, sincere, and open to contact with the foreigners. Every time I visit Pyeongyang, I come to the magnificent Palace of Youth and Schoolchildren where great and multi-faceted work with children is carried on; I have a great pleasure watching the performances by children's arts groups there.

Korean War and the Role of Russia

Q: I heard you have said that the Russian army was crucial to the liberation of Korea. However it is thought that the liberation of Korea was influenced by the decisive factor of the atomic bombing of Japan by the US. What is your opinion about it?

A: It has become habitual for South Korean historiography to underestimate or just negate the Soviet role in the liberation of Korea. It is said that Korea was liberated from colonial slavery by the USA exclusively, that it was only the activities of the allies in the Pacific along with the American bombing of Japan that forced Japan to surrender in August 1945 while the USSR allegedly took advantage of it, joined the allies at the very end of the war, and, pursuing its expansionist goals, invaded North Korea without any effort or sacrifice worth the name. To add, it was only for the first 15-20 years after 1945 that North Korea itself recognized the Soviet liberation mission. After that, they also began to downplay the Soviet contribution or just to kept mum about it.

The truth is that the USSR contributed greatly to the defeat of Japan and the liberation of Korea. Korean historians do not consider an extremely important circumstance: during World War II, in 1941-1945, it was upon the USSR that the heaviest blow of the biggest and mightiest aggressor and Japan's major ally, Nazi Germany, fell, assisted by the mammoth industrial, military and human potential of conquered Europe. The Soviet Union withstood the blow and won despite unbelievable losses (more than 27 million lives). It is easy to imagine that, if the USSR had been defeated, the whole of German military might assisted by Japan would have fallen upon the USA and Great Britain, therefore the war in the Pacific as well as the destiny of Korea would have had a different turn.

For quite a long time the USA and Great Britain pressed upon the USSR to enter the war with Japan. Their motive was that when the war came close to the Japanese islands, Japanese resistance would grow infinitely. According to the American military planners, there was a full possibility of military operations continuing up to the spring of 1946 or even up to 1947 resulting in growing losses from the allies' side as the Japanese forces, based upon the Pacific islands, would then be assisted by Japan's major land force, the million-strong Kuangtung army, stationed in North-Eastern China. Only the USSR was able to prevent such an adverse development and able to assist the allies. Our country could answer the allies' request only when it became clear that Germany's full

defeat was near. At the Yalta meeting of the leaders of the USA, Great Britain, and the USSR (February, 1945), the Soviet Union took the responsibility to join the war with Japan three months after the defeat of Germany. On the 9th of May 1945, Germany surrendered and precisely three months after that, on the 9th of August, the Soviet Union began war with Japan, not to meet some selfish ends but to fulfill its promises as an ally, though it had its own claims to make on Japan. The Soviet military activities in Korea and on other Far Eastern fronts were short but not as easy as they are sometimes described. The Japanese fought fiercely and in many cases continued to fight even after Japan's officially declared surrender. Suffice it to say that in Korea the Soviet army lost 1,963 men killed and wounded, not counting the losses of the 25th Army (the one that liberated Korea) in Manchuria, on its way to Korea.

As it would be unjust to underestimate the significance of the allies' operations in the Pacific and atomic bombing of Japan, it would be likewise unjust to view them as the sole reason for Japan's surrender. Japan surrendered, apart from other reasons, due to the Russian involvement that deprived Japan of support from the Kuangtung army. Whatever the approach to this problem may be, we should not forget that the Soviet army was the only one that shed blood on Korean soil for the liberation of Korea.

Q: For the harmonious reconciliation of South and North Korea we have to resolve the problems of the Korean War. There are two major different views about the war: one is that North Korea insisted the war was intended to liberate the Korean nation. The other is that it was an absolute invasion. The disagreement must be overcome. What is your opinion on the Korean War?

A: The Korean War took place more than 50 years ago but it still attracts the attention of scholars, politicians, and the general public in Korea and other countries, including Russia. It shows how important this event was in the 20th century history of the world.

I share the opinion of those who view the Korean War as inevitable. At that time, in the mid 1950s, against the background of cold war between two rival social systems, all disputes were usually solved by the use of military force. The Korean problem was no exception.

While relating the prehistory of the war observers usually take special note of the 1948 establishment of the two Korean states—the DPRK and the ROK. But in most cases it is not mentioned that each of these newly established states

claimed the same territory, that of the whole of Korea. In fact, it meant that two governments were formed in Korea, each refusing to recognize the other and each having as its main goal the liquidation of the opposing regime and the unification of the country under its own jurisdiction. This goal at that time was achievable only by extremely violent methods, and any compromise was ruled out. While the North, albeit propagandistically, did come forward with peace initiatives, the South rejected them categorically and adhered to the idea of a “March to the North” initiated by Syngman Rhee.

The Korean War began as a purely internal conflict, as a struggle of two rival governments for undivided authority over the country. It was fought for the unification of Korea and the ideological motives so frequently emphasized as major ones by the scholars played in reality a less significant role. As it was in fact a civil war it would be wrong to speak of an “aggression” by one of the sides. And as the war was objectively unavoidable it is not so important, to my mind, who was the first to step across the 38th parallel and pull the trigger. It is well known that the war was preceded by multiple intrusions of the North and South forces against each other’s territory and perhaps one of them grew into a full-scale attack on the 25th of June, 1950.

At the US initiative the internal conflict in Korea was transformed into a huge and very dangerous international conflict that narrowly escaped further transformation into World War III, the nuclear one. Having suffered a painful defeat in China, shortly before the above-described events, the USA made up their mind to combat “world Communism” in Korea. Following the USA, other countries, directly or indirectly, got involved in the war. Nor was the Soviet Union keeping aloof. External involvement was the main reason for the Korean War to span long three years and to bring uncountable sufferings to the Korean people.

The most important lesson of the Korean War is that Korea can never be unified by force. One more such conflict, given the present-day level of arms and military techniques, may question the very existence of Korea. To prevent this calamity is of vital importance for the Korean people, its neighbors, and the world community as a whole.

Opinions on North Korean Issues

Q: You have concerned yourself with the North Korea issue. It was governed by two leaders, Kim Il Sung’s government followed by Kim Jong Il’s. Could you

please evaluate the two leaders and tell me what they have in common and what the difference between them is?

A: It is difficult for me to answer this question. I never met any of the North Korean leaders personally and can judge them by their policies, their articles, and speeches only, as well as by the opinions of those who have actually contacted them. My impression is that both of them are really big political leaders, not just of Koreans, but also of world significance. They have much in common—both are intelligent, resolute, able to control the situation and to attain settled goals—great experts in political maneuvering. It is not by chance that the North Koreans say today: “Kim Jong Il is the Kim Il Sung of today.”

Kim Il Sung, no doubt, had more experience in all spheres of statecraft and military leadership. A reader of his writings is surprised by his deep and even professional insight into concrete spheres of economy. Even more deep was his expertise in military affairs. Kim Jong Il in his father's lifetime was busied mainly with party and ideological problems as well as the relations with the South. While Kim Il Sung was a high level practical politician, Kim Jong Il is more a theoretician who has formed the *juche* ideas put forward by his father into a philosophical doctrine. Kim Jong Il turned to the problems of defense and economy only after his father's death, during the period that was extremely difficult for his country and, as we can judge, he is active and persistent in solving them. At the same time he seems to be less bound to the mental stereotypes of the past and ready for daring, even risky, steps if necessary.

Q: North Korea has faced an unprecedented financial crisis since the 1990s. It may be a politically threatening factor. Please describe your prospect of North Korea's economy and politics.

A: The financial and economic situation in North Korea since the mid-1990s is indeed very complicated. By the way, they do not keep it secret. They even claim that it is harder than after the Korean War. When I talked to scholars in Pyongyang they mentioned the following reasons for their country's economic difficulties: the collapse of the world socialist system; military pressure and endless economic blockades by the USA; and repeated natural calamities, disastrous in their scale and effect. By the end of his lifetime Kim Il Sung had more than once pointed to mistakes and shortcomings in economic planning and management. To this I may add sometimes too heavy and unjustified expenditures on

certain propaganda projects.

Whatever North Korea's economic difficulties are, the situation is not as catastrophic as some media in your country and mine make us believe. Of course, it would be wrong to form an idea of the whole country by visiting only the capital and big cities as I did. But the very life of those cities as well as the appearance and behavior of their inhabitants disprove the concocted picture of the nearly starving and dying population. The claims that millions died of hunger there is nothing but malicious slander. But some increase in death, as I was told, was apparent. Financial difficulties due to the above-mentioned reasons were responsible for a decrease in health care, especially in the sphere that is most developed in North Korea—preventive medicine.

North Korea, we have to note, spares no efforts to actively withstand all these hardships. The country that had declared a “self-reliance course” made an unprecedented step—it appealed to world community for food help. At the same time they are searching for more local opportunities like re-arranging cultivable lands more rationally, expanding irrigation networks, introducing more productive crops, and trying to achieve two harvests a year. They also do their best to solve the problems in energy, industry, and transport.

All in all, the North Korean economy witnesses now a number of remarkable phenomena not always adequately understood by the outside world. They depart from the previously existing strict system of planning and management and encourage initiative from local authorities and working collectives. Significant steps are being made towards introducing market relations and inviting foreign capital investments along with widening economic links with the outside world. A great role in this direction has to be played by active cooperation with the ROK.

Making predictions for North Korea's economic and political perspectives is a difficult and fruitless job. These perspectives depend upon numerous, and in many cases unpredictable, internal and external factors. I would only say that the statements made by some people to the effect that the North Korean leadership may seek a way out of economic hardship on the path of military adventure are nonsense. Whatever opinion of Kim Jong Il and his associates one may have, they should hardly be described as suicidal. At the end of his lifetime Kim Il Sung had made it clear more than once that the North was neither planning to attack the South nor had enough strength for that.

Present-day North Korean reality, if viewed by an unbiased observer, exhibits clear signs of more openness, modernization of economic and political systems, and positive participation in the life of world community. They are

doing it step by step and very carefully, following neither outside recipes nor directions, but autonomously determining adequate forms, methods, and tempo. In this they have to be assisted, or at least not disturbed. Military pressure and threats from the US administration make North Korea feel itself a “besieged fortress,” forcing the country to expend more and more on defense and thus block its development toward the direction that would be desirable for all.

Q: The question of Kim Jong Il’s successor is now being discussed actively by the press outside North Korea. How do you think the North Korean political leaders will deal with the succession matter?

A: As a politician, Kim Jong Il is not old, and, as far as it is known, he is in proper working condition. No serious rival is observable in his surroundings. He might have been stripped of power by the military, as happened in other countries, but they hardly need it as they do enjoy predominant positions in ruling the state; Kim Jong Il is pursuing the policy of “army priority” (Songun). Previously, this question was viewed there as crucial in revolution and socialist construction; promoting Kim Jong Il as a successor was described as Kim Il Sung’s major political achievement. Perhaps Kim Jong Il, too, is now contemplating on his successor so as to be sure about the continuation of his political course. But I know nothing concrete on this matter.

Russia and the Two Koreas

Q: I think that Russia and North Korea has kept a close and favorable relationship since 2000. Does it have influence on North Korean studies in Russia? Please tell me the status and problems on North Korean studies in Russia today.

A: I have already expressed my view of the present-day state of Russia-North Korea relations. It would be an exaggeration to define them as “close and favorable.” As for the level of North Korea studies in Russia now it is, unfortunately, not as high as it was 20-30 years ago or as present-day academic interest and political practice would require. This can be explained, to my mind, by two major reasons. First is the acute deficiency of reliable information, primarily from North Korea itself, concerning the real state of affairs in the country. Second is the atmosphere of arrogance and dislike of North Korea that emerged

in the early 1990s and still being supported by the opponents of President Putin's course towards the normalization of the relations with Pyeongyang as revealed by some Russian Koreanists who neglect the objective and unprejudiced study of North Korean problems.

Due to these reasons, the position of North Korean studies in present-day Russia is far from satisfactory, in my opinion at least. No large-scale work on North Korea has been published here since 2000, a striking contrast to the spate of publications on South Korea during the same period. As a rule, North Korea figures in a relatively small number of articles or conference papers. Their thematic range is limited to the crisis situation around North Korea's nuclear program, the country's position in the inter-Korea talks, and Russia-North Korea relations and their perspectives. Some attempts are being made to assess the socio-economic situation in North Korea but due to the above-mentioned negative factors these attempts are in many cases far from being objective or convincing.

Q: Unfortunately, there is no field where extreme opinion exists as an area of North Korean studies. The North Korean studies in western countries and South Korea have been conducted from a conservative view. Would you please tell me your appraisal about the tendency?

A: I would not claim an exhaustive knowledge of North Korean studies in western countries and South Korea. The country attracts the attention of the whole world and it is hardly possible to trace and read all publications on it. As a historian I am interested mainly in the works on North Korean history, especially its earlier period. Among the recent publications on this subject you may come across a number of serious works that are based upon some new source materials and try to view this or that important problem anew. There are comprehensive and useful publications on the present-day situation in North Korea. The Russian scholars aptly quote from them.

But what I happen to read and hear creates an impression that many foreign scholars have only vague knowledge of the concrete developments in North Korea. Their works are marked by a partisan and non-objective approach to the events and processes there with an excessive dependence upon obsolete mental stereotypes and ideological and political prejudices against North Korea, aggravated by the obedient support of the US official position. The main thing is that some authors are unable, or just unwilling, to see and rationally assess new tendencies that are emerging and developing now in various spheres of North

Korean life (I have briefly mentioned them above). Nor are they willing to understand the initial motives, principles and perspectives of the decisions and practical measures taken there to view the interrelation of internal and external factors influencing the situation in the country. This is to me a manifestation of not only conservatism, as you have put it, but of the direct impact of politics on academic research.

Q: Nowadays President Putin is doing his best to exert diplomatic influence over the development of events in Northeast Asia. Is there any problem in the current Putin government's approach to South and North Korea?

A: Being very critical of many aspects of the policies of President Putin and his government, I support their course on the Korean direction. Putin is trying to fill the losses sustained in the first half of the 1990s from the deeply misguided and unwise policies of President Yeltsin and his foreign minister Kozyrev. Hoping, in their servility towards USA, for its approval, and for additional bonuses from South Korea, they minimized all contacts with the North and sometimes even took a hostile position towards it. I had to publish a number of articles in the press protesting against such an unjust attitude to the DPRK.

President Putin's goal, as I understand it, is to rectify the biased policies of his predecessor and to pursue a balanced policy on the Korean peninsula. Given all the differences in the scope and contents of Russia's relations with the ROK and the DPRK in regards to the difference in the two countries' potentials, these relations should be based upon equal measures of mutual respect, good-neighborhood relations, and constructive cooperation. It is unacceptable, as happened previously, to improve relations with one at the expense of worsening them with the other.

Russo-Korean relations face a lot of problems, primarily in the economic sphere. But while with the South the problem is of the further increase in the already significant trade and economic cooperation and of a more rational use of the already existing opportunities of every country concerned, with the North the task is to restore what has been unreasonably ruined from 10-15 years back. After the collapse of the USSR, the realization of many large-scale, promising and mutually useful projects requiring Russia? North Korea cooperation were dashed. Here is, by the by, one of the reasons for North Korea's present day economic hardships. Russia has voluntarily thrown to the winds the solid economic positions that the USSR had held there. It is quite difficult now to reclaim these positions.

Both sides have almost no funds to restore the previously achieved level of economic cooperation while Russian private business is unwilling to go to DPRK.

I should say that President Putin's course to normalize the relations with the DPRK is not agreed upon by all strata of the Russian public. In the circles of "liberal" politicians and media under their control, along with some Koreanists, there are people who, in their pro-American orientation, press upon Putin to join the course adopted by US President George Bush for a military solution to North Korean problems. Their attitudes and activities have a negative effect upon the realization of Putin's Korean policies. Opposing them in press and all kinds of public discussions, as I have to do too, makes it clear that rectifying and balancing Russia's relations with both Korean states continues on in a rather complicated situation.

Q: The current Russian influence decreased remarkably compared to that of old Russia. Could you speak about the function of Russia in South and North Korea reconciliation?

A: I feel that the level of influence of the USSR upon the situation in Korea should not be exaggerated. After the end of the Korean War this influence decreased due to various reasons. In the times of Yeltsin and Kozyrev, due to their unreasonable policies, Russian influence in Korean affairs almost reached zero. Still, Russia, holding stable, equal and friendly relations with both Korean states may assist them significantly in their mutual understanding and rapprochement. This is one of the chief goals of President Putin's policy in Korea. It is fortunate that Russia's useful capabilities to facilitate a peaceful solution to the Korean problem are well understood by the leaders of the North and the South and their talks with President Putin bear witness to this.

It is an exclusive prerogative of the Korean people to choose the forms and methods of restoring their national unity. But they need help in facilitating mutual trust and reconciliation. Russia is able, and on a larger scale than presently being done, to assist in lowering of the level of military tension on the Korean peninsula. Russia could also act to check unwanted interference from outside into the Korean reconciliation process that has already suffered many drawbacks due to this factor, thereby creating favorable conditions for making another military confrontation in Korea impossible. I feel that in this direction Russia has a wide field of activity, now and in the future.

Q: South Korea has achieved wonderful economic development, as you know. However there are some political and economic problems to be solved. Do you have any suggestions? And do you think we can solve the problems?

A: I am of course fully aware of South Korea's economic achievements. I am very happy about them and wish your country further successes. Being neither an economist nor a sociologist I would refrain from any recommendations. Your politicians and scholars know better than anyone what problems exist in your country and how to solve them. Allow me to make just a few observations that I by no means consider indisputable.

Firstly, I would be very pleased to see more signs of the ROK's independence from the USA, given all the importance of friendly relations between them. To be sincere, I was very upset by the decision to send South Korean troops to Iraq since the invasion, organized by the US, can be denoted as neither lawful nor useful for Iraq and the world, and your country may suffer unreasonable losses there. The question of terminating the American military presence in the ROK has ripened and, I would say, is over-ripe for solution. This military presence diminishes the level of South Korea's sovereignty and blocks the way for its further reconciliation with the North. It is difficult to understand the reasons for the constant growth of your military expenditures despite the fact that your defense potential is much higher than that of the North. The money saved by decreasing military spending would hardly be useless for the solution of socio-economic problems that your country is facing now. As any Russian, I am in favor of a more wide and active cooperation between the ROK and Russia in all directions, for which lots of possibilities still have not been made use of. In this connection I would like to make a special emphasis upon the very positive and promising results of the recent visit to Russia by the respected President of the Republic of Korea, Mr. Roh Moo-hyun.

Over the Cold War, toward the Unification of the Two Koreaes

Q: The Cold War is already over, but its effect remains on the Korean Peninsula. Could you explain the current political environment of the Korean peninsula and neighboring countries?

A: The situation on the Korean peninsula is always dangerously tense. It is very

much so at present too. This seems to be inevitable as for more than half a century huge piles of “cold war garbage” have been stocked there. They are responsible for the periodical aggravations of tension but, to do credit to the North and South Korean leaders, they have hitherto succeeded in not allowing the tension to grow into an explosive crisis. But, in my opinion, there exists a more dangerous source of tension on the Korean peninsula—US intervention into the internal affairs of the two Korean states and relations between them, as well as the US military presence in the South, their never-ending threats against Pyongyang, and so on. Justification of US policies by their “care” for peace, democracy, human rights, peace and stability can hardly fool anybody. The events in Iraq have already demonstrated their real value. The US administration just does not like the political system and the leader of the DPRK and spares no efforts to change them by the use of force. But nobody has the right to deny the DPRK, a UN member like the USA, the right to choose.

The main problem is of a different kind—the US administration is afraid that the North-South reconciliation may be too quick and steadfast and result in the US withdrawal from Korean land. To prevent this, a time-tested method is used—to scare everybody, primarily the South Koreans, with “North Korea’s nuclear preparations.” Thus, they have succeeded in preventing Koreans from settling their own problems after the 1991 Agreement on reconciliation, non-interference, cooperation and exchange between the North and the South was signed. Like all friends of Korea, I am pleased that now both Korean governments are not giving way to the new turn of nuclear blackmail enacted by the US since the autumn of 2002. I hope that in the future as well Korean leaders will not allow themselves to be diverted from the right course by outside forces.

For its closest neighbors, China and Russia, Korea has always been and is an important object of their foreign policies. We have to admit that in the Korean question, China has been more consistent and stable. It never allowed its policy to “zigzag” like that of Russia in the 1990s. Therefore, China has more constructive and active relations with both North and South Korea. Russia now has to make up for its lost opportunities. In developing and widening their cooperation with both parts of Korea, both China and Russia are interested in peace and stability being firmly established on the Korean peninsula. They are trying to brake somewhat the dangerous aggressiveness of the US approach to the complicated problems of Korean reconciliation, though, however, they might have been more active and steadfast in doing so. Japan, on the Korean question, follows the USA but in recent years it has exhibited a certain capability for unexpected and

independent steps, albeit not very rewarding hitherto.

Q: Ancient Korea was formed with the Three Kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla and used the same language. South and North Korea are paying particular attention to the fact that Goguryeo is being treated as just another of ancient China's many regional powers in China's Northeast Asia Project. What do you think about China's Project?

A: The attempt of certain circles in China to call into question the Korean character of the state Goguryeo and to call into question the Korean identity of its heritage are amazing to Russian specialists on Korea. That circumstance, that some monuments of material culture of Goguryeonow are in the Chinese territory, cannot be an argument for the benefit of Chinese claims. It is well-known that the process of the territorial consolidation of China was long and included both internal wars of ruling dynasties, and aggressive campaigns reaching other countries. A large portion of what is now northeast China was at one time part of Goguryeo and consequently monuments of Goguryeo culture remain there until now. It is especially important to have a balanced and objective approach toward Goguryeo that takes into account all historic facts and all complexities involved in interrelations and influences. Scientists should be exempted from unhealthy nationalist sights and separate themselves from politically motivated purposes that have nothing in common with science. Unfortunately, such unscientific approaches have prevailed over those who refuse to recognize Goguryeo as a bright and significant page of Korean history.

Q: This year marks the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Korea from Japanese colonial rule and the division of North and South Korea. Please tell me your opinion about the prospect of unification of the two Koreas.

A: I am absolutely sure that Korean unification is historically inevitable. I will not venture in foretelling the concrete time for that, but I think that in the coming 10-15 years the Korean people will be able to overcome the national tragedy of disintegration. Anyhow, I hope for that.

That Korea should and will be united is attested to by its centuries-old history as an integral sovereign state that has created a colorful and unique culture along with firm national traditions. It is attested to by the fact that the population of both the North and South remains loyal to these traditions, and reveres Korea as

a common motherland of its forefathers and wholeheartedly aspires for the restoration of the country's unity. It is likewise corroborated by the fact that the North and South desperately need each other in all spheres of life; it is only after their unification and mutual integration that Korea will become a really strong, highly developed and flourishing state and occupy a worthy place in the world community.

Let me share with you an observation that strengthens my belief in the forthcoming unification of Korea. A curious calendar exists in the interrelations of the two parts of the country. As is well known, the disintegration of Korea began in 1945; it was fixed by the emergence of two Korean states in 1948 and the war between them in 1950-1953. But the subsequent 27 years of disintegration were followed by the Joint statement of the North and the South of July 4, 1972 to formulate major principles of unification: independence, peace, great national consolidation. Half this time, 13 years, was needed for the first attempt at the realization of the above-mentioned principles: the first exchange of "visiting groups" from the divided families took place in 1985. Half as much time again, i.e., six years, was the way to the historical event of signing the 1991 agreement on reconciliation, non-intervention, cooperation and exchange between the North and the South. Three years later, in July 1994 (again half the previous time) an even more important event was to take place—first summit of North and South Korean leaders. It did not happen due to Kim Il Sung's death.

Hence, as my calendar shows, the North and South have in the last few decades made a number of significant steps towards each other; each step being more prominent and important and requiring approximately half the time in comparison with the preceding one. More often than not, the periods between the steps witnessed drawbacks in North-South relations, sometimes very serious ones, but still both sides successfully joined efforts in overcoming them. I view this development pattern as a manifestation of the objectively existing tendency of Korea's steadfast movement towards the restoration of its national unity.

A much more positive realization of the above-mentioned tendency was the Pyeongyang summit of June 2000. In the "Joint North-South Declaration" signed by Kim Jong Il and Kim Dae-jung, both participants themselves termed the summit as historical. They penned down the agreed principles of Korea's peaceful unification and determined some concrete measures to approach the goal. I was really happy when South Korean President Kim Dae-jung was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. But I feel that North Korean leader Kim Jong Il fully deserved this award too. Both Korean leaders made great efforts to make

their historical summit possible, and it was anything but easy for either of them.

Of extreme importance, to my mind, is the fact that the “Joint North-South Declaration” has not remained on paper and is now being brought into life intensively. There is hardly a significant aspect of North-South relations where work on its implementation is not carried on now. Far as I am from exaggerating the already achieved results, I may still observe that four years on, after the Pyeongyang summit, have made the North and the South to a certain extent closer and more understandable of each other. It is fortunate that the directions and tempo of cooperation as decided upon by both sides were not obstructed by US-inspired aggravation of tension around the “nuclear problems” of the North. This, no doubt, goes to the credit of both North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and the present-day South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun.

The successful realization of mutual determination to achieve Korean reconciliation, as declared in the Pyeongyang summit, will depend primarily upon both sides’ full and consistent adherence to the major principle of their “Joint Declaration” which provides that “the South and the North have agreed to resolve the question of reunification on their own initiative and through the joined efforts of the Korean people, who are the masters of the country.” It is only based upon independence and guided exclusively by the goals and interests of the Korean people that the patriotic forces in the North and the South may achieve unity. Their great national consolidation will be implemented and the cherished desire of the Korean people to restore the unity of their beautiful country will be realized. By the way, the level of independence of Korean reconciliation will, to a considerable extent, determine the attitude of Korea’s closest neighbors to this process. They would hardly like the process of Korean unification to develop under the control and too active an influence of an outside force that, no doubt, would use it in its own interests and thus complicate the existing problematic situation in the region.

We, the Russian friends of Korea, wholeheartedly wish Korean unification to be quick, necessarily peaceful and democratic, harming neither North nor South. Personally, I feel that the concept of unification through confederation as suggested by Pyeongyang may be an effective choice for this. Perhaps the favorable conditions offered by this concept for an equal and effective merger of the two parts of Korea have to be studied in a more detailed and unbiased way. But, as I have already said, it is for the Korean people only to decide.

КСІ