

October 12, 1956
**Letter from Ri Sang-jo to the Korean Workers' Party
Central Committee**

Citation:

"Letter from Ri Sang-jo to the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee", October 12, 1956, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Library of Congress, DK949.32 K6 Korea Cage. Obtained for NKIDP by James F. Person and translated for NKIDP by Choe Lyong. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/114166>

Summary:

Ri Sang-jo seeks to redress the issue of aid from the Soviet Union by reminding party members of the CPSU's friendship and assistance to the North Korean people both before and after the Korean War. Ri discloses Soviet criticism of Kim Il Sung's economic policies and the cult of personality during meetings held in Moscow in the summer of 1956 and insists that the DPRK learn from the experiences of the fraternal communist parties in economic planning and in their struggles against cults of personality.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

Korean

Contents:

Translation - English

Dear comrades who are attending the Central Committee Plenum

This year our government delegation visited the Soviet Union and other fraternal countries and received large amounts of international aid.

These huge amounts of aid are important since they will improve the material well-being of our people. In particular, the support of the Soviet Union demonstrates once again how much the communist party, government, and people of the Soviet Union have a great interest in lives of the people of North Korea.

As a member of the government delegation, an ambassador delegated from the party, nation, and people, and a candidate member of the central committee elected during the party congress, I feel the need to introduce the aid from the Soviet Union to our comrades.

I am presenting these issues in writing because it is possible that some delegates of our government will pay no attention to several important issues, nor even mention several fundamental issues in presentations to the party's Central Committee.

This year, in addition to financial support, the communist party and government of the Soviet Union gave us valuable advice about camaraderie as well as political and ideological problems.

Government delegates are supposed to forthrightly present the friendly advice from the Communist Party of the USSR to our party's central committee and publicly correct the problems. When we refer to these problems, we need to cite the work of our Soviet comrades after the 20th Party Congress.

The records of the meetings of comrades Khrushchev and [Bulganin] with British political leaders during Khrushchev and Bulganin's visit to the United Kingdom have been conveyed and even publicly read by party cells.

In general, notifying [the people] what our leaders, elected by the members of the Korean Workers' Party, say to someone, and how others respond to our leaders is important since party members need to be aware of the leaders' daily activities, supervise them, subject them to friendly criticism, and evaluate them. This is one of the principles of party organization handed down from Leninist ideology. Why, then, can't our government delegation disclose the advice from the Soviet Union's central committee to the members of our communist party and publicly correct the defects in our party's work?

I will now tell you what kind of friendly criticism we received from the Soviet party.

First of all, we do not pay enough attention to improving the lives of our people. We collect too much from farmers while providing them with few resources, and workers live under extremely harsh conditions.

Considering that our nation is divided, improving the lives of the North Korean people in particular is in our interests as well as those of the Korean people. I will not talk about this issue at length here because it was discussed after the return of our delegation.

The second and most important ideological problem for all communists, which has caught the attention of all fraternal parties and is presently being discussed around the world in the wake of the CPSU CC 20th Congress is the problem of personality

cults. According to the report from the [Korean Workers' Party] 3rd Party Congress and discussions among [the party] leadership, there is no cult of personality other than that of Pak Heon-yeong [Pak Hon Yong] in the [former] South Korean Workers' Party. During a meeting on this issue, attended by all of the members of the Soviet Presidium and comrades Kim Il Sung, Pak Jeong-ae [Pak Jong Ae], and Nam Il [Nam Il], the Soviet comrades declared that Pak Heon-yeong does not have a personality cult among members of [the former] South Korean Workers' Party, but comrade Kim Il Sung has a personality cult. I endorse this reasonable claim.

In terms of both theory and practice, it is difficult to explain how we do not have a personality cult, while at the same time this is being discussed among fraternal parties.

Can we say that we have unique conditions that make us evade errors that prevail in the international communist movement?

We, as Marxist-Leninists, have to openly and frankly clarify this problem. In this regard, I must admit that unique conditions do not exist [in the DPRK] that help us avoid these errors.

Rather, we cannot help but admit that comrade Kim Il Sung's personality cult has gradually developed because of internal factors.

Anyone who read the historic decision of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's (CPSU) Central Committee (30 June 1956) can see how the conditions that made possible Stalin's personality cult first developed. In our case, the factors include the timing of the beginning and process of our revolution, and the hardships of invasion from foreign countries, all of which forced us to delegate all national powers to one individual and limit the democratic right of our people. These factors have led to the gradual promotion and development of Kim Il Sung's personality cult.

At this time in particular, it is our party's policy that although everyone works, all honor is given to the leader.

At present all fraternal parties are discussing the cult of personality and its consequences in order to eradicate problems, which were unrelated to Leninism. We cannot further develop the creativity and revolutionary zeal of the masses without first practically and theoretically eradicating the cult of personality.

Under the present conditions, both theoretically and practically, a significant personality cult exists in the work of our party, and as Bolsheviks, we should admit and correct the effects of this problem, which only serves to weaken our practical work, collective leadership, and creative zeal.

Can we deny the fact that we have a cult of personality after looking through all of our magazines, newspapers, and propaganda materials?

If we deny this fact, then we are simply ignoring all members of the party and deceiving ourselves.

How can we say that our party did not commit any errors when, with the exception of a few fraternal parties where democracy and collective leadership are guaranteed, other ruling fraternal [communist] parties are correcting their mistakes with the cult of personality after mechanically importing Stalin's business method?

We can figure out this fact from several simple examples. What do the titles of great leader, gifted general, etc., mean? And how we can explain the fact that we considered our war for independence the victory and one individual's accomplishment when it cost the lives of countless young men and women and was the result of the whole people's endeavor?

Surely, this is not a denial of the role and achievements of comrade Kim Il Sung in our party.

Recalling the damage caused by the cult of personality, I present this problem in order to correct mistakes that have not yet been overcome. Can we guarantee that no comrade has been imprisoned because of his opinion of our leaders or criticism of our leaders' policies?

How can one be considered a dissenter against the Workers' Party simply because one's opinion is not the same as that of the leader? This is just as unreasonable as the claim that someone is anti-Soviet only because he or she said that some Soviet goods are not very high quality.

Under these conditions, can we say that collective leadership is guaranteed in the party? Even if we hold meetings more than one million times, the number of meetings does not guarantee the quality of the collective leadership itself. As long as there is a significant cult of personality, guaranteeing collective leadership is almost a miracle in the twentieth century. Under conditions where expressing an opinion that differs from that of the leader makes that individual a factionalist, how can people propose creative opinions?

One comrade who attended a low-level party meeting was punished for stating that any party member can criticize anyone, including the prime minister. Yet he only mentioned a right guaranteed by the party statutes.

Considering just this one case, we can estimate to what degree Lenin's criteria for party life has been guaranteed. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in our past meetings, one person spoke while others simply praised and admired him.

It is an enormous mistake if some leaders consider the members of the party's central committee and representatives elected by our people as mere democratic decorations who simply pass drafts of the leaders' decisions.

Members elected to the central committee can participate in all work, have their own opinions, and have different views from those of the leader on concrete issues!

Issues on which people have different views must be resolved through debates involving many members of the central committee. We should prevent the top leaders from arbitrarily deciding to ignore the proposals of others during meetings.

Can we say that there was no such phenomenon in our party in the past? Are you aware of the fact that numerous appointments of members to the central committee (including members of the Standing Committee) had been passed only by the proposal of comrade Kim Il Sung, in violation of articles strictly regulated in the party statutes? Can we say that Lenin's criteria for party life have been well observed?

To be sure, the stigma of the personality cult has been stamped on our faces and cannot be removed. Disclosing and correcting the defects is absolutely necessary. If I am considered a factionalist or anti-party just for suggesting this, then the law is absurd.

Why do we simply regard the attempts of all communists to return to Leninist roots as others' business and not make any efforts to eliminate the defects of our party by admitting that the bloody experience of the USSR is relevant to our party's work?

If we achieve the reunification of Korea without first eliminating the bureaucratic remains and consequences of the cult of personality and improving the lives of the people, then it will be very risky.

Many people may not follow us if we subjectively and bureaucratically conduct all businesses with simple administrative orders when each party develops business on the basis of equality.

Therefore, I desire that this plenum will be a critical meeting at which we do away with bureaucratism by ridding ourselves of the cult of personality.

How can we say that the fact that the power of the party, government and military is ruled by one individual, and how can we say that this is normal, and that this is not related to the cult of personality?

I, on behalf of the Soviet party, think that we should pay attention to our Soviet comrades' advice.

However, opposite to our assertion, in the Pyongyang city party committee, comrade Pak Geum-cheol [Pak Kum Chol], the vice chairman of party central committee responsible for workers' committees and in the central party school, comrade Ri Il-gyeong [Ri Il Kyong] emphasized yet again that we do not have a cult of personality.

I was so angry when I heard their words because many conscientious communists cannot agree with them.

It is unpardonable behavior to ignore the party and the party central committee of the Soviet Union.

There was no Marxist who expected that the communist party deify one figure while punishing those who criticize the deified one.

Regarding a get-together of four or five leaders for dinner as scheming and spying can not be part of the party's business.

Traditional Marxists certify the integral freedom of speech in the party and expect that a democracy managed by communists will be based on the human rights of all people, except rebels.

For this reason, in socialist society, democracy respects the proletariat, and numerous people sacrificed themselves for that democracy. When we revolutionaries participated in the struggle for revolution, our fundamental aims were to realize human freedom which guarantees human rights and puts a stop to the exploitation of humans by other humans. We need to remember that we have fought and are fighting for these aims in order to improve the people's living standards. Based on this principle, is it reasonable that we deify one individual and submit to one's power?

I emphasize that in our party's plenum we should make the right conclusion on this important and fundamental problem.

The second problem is the problem of party history. According to the Soviet comrades, the party history, described in Moggun Joseon, is just the history of comrade Kim Il Sung, not the history of the party.

I agree entirely with this opinion. In our Joseon past, there were glorious anti-Japan struggles, numerous labor movements which supported the interests of the proletariat, peasant movements, student movements, and feminist movements. Can we ignore all of these revolutionary movements and only regard Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese partisan campaign and the association of independent nation as our tradition? When it comes to armed campaigns, besides Kim Il Sung's anti-Japan partisan campaign, there were numerous anti-Japanese movements performed by Choe Yong-geon [Choe Yong Gon], Kim Chaek [Kim Chek], and Ri Hong-gwang [Ri Hong Kwang] whose Korean militias fought against Japan in China, as well as other militias in Korea. In spite of this fact, how can we ignore all of them and only consider Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese partisan militia as the basis and tradition of our party and communist forces? Describing this history (just describing the history of Kim Il Sung and his campaign) does not coincide with the truth. How many comrades in our party who still survive and participated in the campaign of Kim Il Sung and the association of an independent nation? There are very few!

Before the independence of Korea, there were so many communist fighters who did not have any relations with comrade Kim Il Sung who had worked in Korea or other countries, China, the USSR, and Japan. Why are their struggles ignored?

Ignoring their struggles is ignoring and fabricating our history!

Therefore, we communists cannot consent to this.

We need to clarify the incorrect aspects of our history made up by Pak Geum-cheol, Han Sang-du [Han Sang Du], Ri Il-gyeong, and Ri Cheong-won [Ri Chong Won]. This unjust behavior can destruct the unity of the party and lead to discontent among party members.

To be sure, the campaign of the Northeastern anti-Japanese partisan movement was glorious and deserves to be respected. However, that campaign must be fairly evaluated and must not be described as the accomplishment of one individual.

We should equally evaluate the role of Choe Yong-jin [Choe Yong Jin], Kim Chaek and other comrades with that of comrade Kim Il Sung. In contrast, we need to indicate the defects of anti-Japanese partisan campaign.

We can point out that even though the campaign was glorious, it also had some defects in terms of the principles of a communist revolutionary campaign. Technically, in actual fact, the Northeastern anti-Japan partisan campaign was finished in 1940. Clearly, we cannot deny the internal and external conditions that resulted in the end of the campaign in actual fact. Related to that, the Japanese imperialists invaded China and prepared to attack the Soviet Union, Japan increased the military pressure on the Northeastern anti-Japan partisan campaign, and this was the serious threat to the existence of the campaign.

Then, did the anti-Japanese partisan group completely disappear? I do not think so. We need to look for the reasons that the group had stopped its campaign since 1940. That is, it was because that the campaign was not able to run parallel with people's movements, so the group did not get enough support from people. Namely, the group was not able to organize a broad-based people's movement.

Then, after 1940, do you think that there were no underground campaigns against Japan in the Northeastern part of China? There were! I am also a member of those who experienced how much people required the leadership of revolutionary groups.

Who can deny that at that time, even in Korea, there were so many underground movements, and people who evaded being drafted by Japanese troops formed mountain units, even though they were relatively small and irregular groups?

The surviving revolutionaries and comrades who attend this convention can confirm my claim.

I urge some of our comrades to stop the stupid behavior of fabricating history. And I also propose that the content of the museum of the revolution be changed; or just change the name of museum to the museum of Kim Il Sung's revolution.

According to a rumor that I heard, the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee has documents about Northeastern anti-Japanese partisans. We need to review these documents and correct the distorted history. I demand that we should dismiss the comrades working in Central Committee who have the wrong point of view and appoint comrades, real Marxists, who will write the real history of our party. Do you think that this is not the result of the personality cult? If not, how can you explain this distorted history?

Third, the Soviet comrades talked about the faction of sycophants. Where there is the cult of personality, there is also the faction of sycophants, just a shadow of the cult of personality. It is no coincidence that if power is concentrated in the hands of one individual, there will be some people who flatter the individual in order to succeed in life. As comrade Khrushchev said, the words of sycophants are sweet, but not helpful to the work of communists. Who can disagree that these people succeed in their lives by harming good comrades with calculated malice? Is it wrong of me to say that there is a faction of sycophants in officialdom where the cult of personality exists?

I advise the party central committee to investigate these sycophants and appoint comrades who can represent the interests of the party and most of the party's members.

Fourth, the Soviet comrades talked about our party's propaganda. Is it necessary to cover up errors and beautify the poor lives of our people? On this issue, we have numerous defects and theoretical problems.

I will not refer to this issue so much but will hypothesize that this is closely related to the cult of personality and that there are serious problems caused by the cult of personality. It is not even mentioned that our party achieved so much thanks to the endeavors of party members and the people. In order for today's meeting to be more fruitful, we need to point out our mistakes and try not to make those mistakes rather than to emphasize our accomplishments in the past.

Even the mistakes that we made in the construction of the economy and culture over the past two or three years are serious. The procurement of grain is an example of those mistakes. Do you know how serious of a problem we are confronted with as a result of procuring grains without using any scientific methods?

Since our party was founded, there were no cases in which our party was estranged from our people. As you know, about 300 people committed suicide because of the coercive methods used to acquire grain from the people. In this case, can we say that the policy was right, but was carried out incorrectly? If the policy was reasonable,

then why did it cause 300 people to commit suicide, and why should the government release more grain from the national reserves than it procured? Except those not free from the cult of personality, do you think that people regard this as a policy for the people?

If we insist that this is a reasonable policy, then this behavior must be the expression of an officialdom that ignores the people.

If we consider what the leader decided was true and the obvious behavior before the 20th Party Congress, today we should criticize this problem by ourselves in front of the party's members. All party workers from the battlefield know that if there had been no reinforcements on the battlefield, numerous peasants would have died of starvation.

Who does not know that someone led our society to confusion by using unreasonable tax policies in order to eliminate private companies? We do not intend to evaluate this policy in order to determine if it is a left-wing or right-wing opportunistic policy. As our fraternal parties did, we should review our work by publicly introducing the facts that some people deify one person by ignoring the laws of socialism, [introduce] what the few schemers raised by the personality cult, and [introduce] what flatterers plotted to do to harm good comrades. We have to identify how many people have been imprisoned and executed illegally in our work. Comrade Brezhnev said to comrade Kim Il Sung that if there are leaders in prison, you need to reconsider their crimes. Yet, we did not yet start this task.

Who believes that there is no one imprisoned secretly in our internal organizations exactly replicating Stalin's gulag system and that we have observed the socialist law?

In Germany, 20,000 imprisoned people were set free, and other fraternal parties [illegible]. Why then are we not able to reform our internal organizations?

Can we accept that so many people are imprisoned illegally in order to maintain one individual's dignity, that people had been executed under the pretext that their behavior was anti-party and anti-nation, and that their families have been punished because of them? Why can't these problems be discussed in the Central Committee plenum every term? We need to disagree to this abnormal idea and eagerly discuss it.

I propose that we delegate one person to begin working on this, giving this individual the authority which allows him to work without any interference.

I suggest that we do away with the old method that allows only a few leaders to know of our work under the pretext that they are internal party secrets.

Right after the start of the Korean War, I visited Beijing under the instructions of comrade Kim Il Sung. I cannot forget Mao Zedong's friendly advice to our party at that time. I consider it my duty to report his advice to you. Comrade Mao Zedong gave us valuable strategic and tactical advice when we carried the fighting to the Nakdong river.

The following is the advice from Mao who heard about the progress of war at that time: Above all, he pointed out that the enemy that the Korean people were confronting was the powerful American imperialists and described three possible scenarios regarding the progress of the war. He asked, "Is there any possibility of the Korean leaders retreating?" and said, [illegible]

The second possibility was that we could not push the enemy down to Busan, and with reinforcements, enemy could orchestrate a counterattack against our forces. Third, Mao also said that it was possible that we could not advance any further, and that the enemies could try to make a raid behind our lines and cut our supply routes. About this possibility, he indicated that we should always be prepared for the worst-case scenario.

His concrete opinion [at that time] was that we should recognize that most of the leaders and combatants of our party could make a strategic retreat and prepare ideological work based on the whole party's efforts, and that we should loosen our siege around the Nakdong river in order to let our enemy disperse and then crush them since the defense of a clustered enemy is as firm as a firmly clenched fist, while to attack a dispersed enemy is as easy as attacking each finger. His advice was validated by the development of the war, especially by the enemy's landing in Incheon. I believe that you know this already since the Korean ambassador to China, comrade Li, already told you.

When I reported this valuable advice to Kim Il Sung, he said to me that we do not have any plan to retreat, that we do not need to do so, and that I should not let other people know about this advice.

How valuable was this advice? I doubt that it was informed to the government, not to mention the Central Committee.

I publicly announced this fact because there are so many classes in our party, that we conceal so many of our defects, and we ignore the valuable advice from our fraternal allies.

I, as the individual who conveyed the friendly advice of the Soviet Union, propose to the committee that we clarify the individual faults of those who intend to conceal the facts, and press them because this [currently followed] way is neither the way of the party nor the way of Bolsheviks.

During plenums, I suggest we correct all of our defects, especially the non-Marxist way of the cult of personality, by engaging in self-criticism. We can correct our errors and defects only through sharp criticism and self-criticism.

In order to get the best results from self-criticism, high-level officials should criticize defects in their own work. I think that the problem in which the leaders decide the construction and destruction of factories based on their own subjective views and not based on professional advice should be discussed in terms of national interests. Instead of calculating the potential, we planned the construction of an automobile plant and meat-processing complex based on the wrong idea of leaders. Even people who do not know much about politics can recognize that the construction of a meat-processing complex is meaningless when the livestock industry is undeveloped. When the Soviet Union decided to give us one billion rubles, the government delegation made so many decisions to build such plants and provide training in the Soviet Union.

I am really curious how the meat-processing plants they decided to build are doing now.

Comrades! We should review the criticism of the Soviet party that pointed out our problems based on the international level of ideology and resolve them based on an elevated level of politics. We, as communists, must strengthen our union with other fraternal parties since the strong solidarity with them is regarded as one of the conditions for victory in the war for a unified Korea. The enemies disagree with the ideas of socialism and peace and try to split the international labor movement and

confuse the communist party and workers party by using the criticism of the cult of personality. However, we should punish our enemies by strengthening solidarity with other socialists.

In order to overcome the cult of personality, we should adopt the proposal that supports collective leadership, one of the fundamental truths of party life, in our party.

This, in particular, is closely related to the Presidium of the Central Committee. As you well know, only in Korea does one person hold the three posts of prime minister, chairman of the Central Committee and commander.

According to the old Korean proverb, the wisdom of ten people is better than that of Zhuge Liang.[\[1\]](#)

We should consider ways to support collective leadership in the party and national activities. Some comrades justify the cult of personality since Korea has developed artificially. I think that this assertion, not based on Marxism, is not even worth criticizing and is even harmful. To us, communists, the most important issue is strengthening relations with people. In order to get the overall support of the people and earn their confidence, we should report all of our problems to the members of the party.

We should struggle against the endeavor to deify one person, earn the wholehearted support of the people and connect with them, and strive to demonstrate to the people that we, members of the Korean Workers' Party, always support workers and believe in the perpetuity of Marxism.

We can realize the ideological and systematic union of our party and strengthen the relations with our brothers in the world only based on this principle.

We, who overcame the dogs of war for three years against invaders, have the power to conscientiously and frankly recognize our mistakes and faults. Moreover, this is the direction of the Great Lenin who built the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries in the world.

Dear respectful comrades!!

I would like for you to review all that I have proposed in this meeting. Because of my thoughts discussed by the central committee, some people will try to accuse me of being a reactionary. However, a truth cannot be concealed. I guess that my written discussion causes different responses among the members of the committee. Yet, even people who praise or praised the cult of personality cannot help accept my words. I think that there are three cases in which some comrades try to correct their faults.

First, they can engage in harsh self-criticize for their faults in order to free themselves.

Second, they can protect the status quo by formally recognizing their own faults in the national activities.

Third, they can illegally detain comrades struggling in the interests of the party or damage other groups of such comrades.

In terms of their political careers, this kind of behavior is surely suicidal to them.

Comrades!! I implore you, full and candidate members of the Central Committee, to actively participate in discussions and resolve this important matter in our activities.

Finally, I, a member of the party, do not mind any criticism from you comrades.

12 October 1956

[\[1\]](#) Editor's note: In the novel *Samguk-ji*, or, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Zhuge Liang was an incredibly talented prime minister and chief commander of the Shu.