DEATH OF A LEADER; Kim Il Sung, Enigmatic 'Great Leader' of North Korea for 5 Decades, Dies at 82

TOKYO, Sunday, July 10— By the time Kim Il Sung died on Friday at the age of 82, there was not one "Great Leader" running North Korea. There were three.

There was the man seen around the world as a Stalinist maniac, who 44 years ago sent his troops pouring over the 38th parallel to unify the Korean Peninsula on his own terms, and who four decades later burst again onto the front pages as a man in search of a nuclear bomb to save his regime. This was the Kim who intimidated his neighbors into silence, who used his unpredictability as a weapon.

There was the Kim Il Sung of North Korean myth, whose likeness dominates Pyongyang and every town square in the form of 30,000 statues, the man who was lionized in song as the "sun of the country" for single-handedly defeating two enemies in one generation: Japan and the United States.

And, in recent years, there was the grandfatherly Kim Il Sung, the smiling leader seeking respect for his economically disabled nation, the man who three weeks ago embraced Jimmy Carter and used him as a conduit to President Clinton, who was not yet born when Mr. Kim was installed as North Korea's leader. It was that incarnation of Mr. Kim that led the former President to declare, with little hint of skepticism, that a "miracle" had occurred. One of the world's most fearsome dictators actually sounded reasonable and eager to end his confrontation with the West.

They were all images that Mr. Kim, the peasants' son who went on to become the longest-surviving Communist leader of the cold war, knew how to exploit brilliantly. When his death came early Friday morning, he had been staging a remarkable international comeback, a shadow from the old newsreels of the Korean War who thrust himself into the atomic glare of the 1990's. An Enduring Puzzle To the Outside World

For those who met him, he was the incongruous dictator of a hard and unforgiving land. Former Representative Stephen J. Solarz of Brooklyn, who met Mr. Kim twice, said a few days ago:
"He has this avuncular persona that stands in stark contrast to the reality of the regime, which is without question the most ruthless and tyrannical anywhere in the world. It is like meeting Hitler at Berchtesgaden and commenting on how he got along with the dogs and the children. He has the blood of millions on his hands; he has a society based on Orwell's '1984.'

"So you expect someone who will act like Saddam Hussein, a forbidding, threatening presence. And he is just the opposite, always smiling, always speaking softly."

In fact, to step into Kim Il Sung's North Korea was to enter a laboratory from Orwell's wildest imaginings: a country that could not afford to keep the lights on at night, and yet which built -- but may never open -- Asia's tallest hotel, a country where the people seemed almost robotic in their praise of their leader and his son, Kim Jong Il, his presumed successor.

Millions of North Koreans, until this morning's news, have never lived in a country not run by Kim Il Sung.

During his rule North Koreans were urged to devote at least two hours a day, and four on Saturdays, to "Kim study," memorizing his sayings. His birthday was, for decades, the nation's greatest holiday, celebrated with "mass games" in which North Korean youth performed remarkable gymnastic feats.

It is a country of operas like "My Happy Country with a Great Leader," whose lyrics include:

O, Generalissimo, Kim Il Sung, Our fatherly leader! The people are unfailingly loyal to you! Our party is the best in the world! Socialism is the best in the world! Let's defend Socialism, Under the unfurled red banner!

Mr. Kim seemed, in every public utterance, to be nothing short of a god. Everything North Koreans received from the government -- clothes, rice, apartments -- were said to come directly from "the Great Leader" or "the Dear Leader," his son. Pyongyang considered 50,000 new apartments to be the Great Leader's birthday gifts to his people. But when a reporter toured these "gifts," no one discussed the fact that there was little heat and electricity.

"You have to remember that at home, President Kim Il Sung is treated as a combination of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abe Lincoln," Mr. Carter said this week in Tokyo.
Mr. Kim's philosophy centered on the principle he called "juche," which he said meant "holding fast to the principle of solving for oneself all the problems of the revolution and construction of one's own efforts." This was to be accomplished, he added, while "applying the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism."

He held every important post in the country, including General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, its one party, and President of the country. And when he died, no one had yet really figured out his game: whether he was using the threat of an atomic weapon to get economic aid for his bankrupt country, or whether he was wielding it as a suicide pill to save his regime from absorption by the South.

"It is possible," one American official who has met Mr. Kim, said today, "that we will now never know." From Humble Origins, A Steep Climb to Power

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