

North Korea and the Cuban Revolution, 1959–1965

Two events in the early months of 1965 signalled that the status quo inside the socialist camp faced a challenge from dissenting forces coalescing within in its own periphery. On February 24, 1965, Ernesto “Che” Guevara spoke at the Second Economic Seminar of Afro-Asian Solidarity in Algiers. In front of an auditorium full of government ministers and political activists from across Africa and Asia, Che accused “the socialist countries” – presumably the Soviet Union, Eastern Bloc states, and perhaps China – of being “accomplices in imperialist exploitation.”¹ He argued that given the drastic disparity in wealth and technology between the socialist camp and the newly independent countries of the Third World, it was “immoral” for trade between the two to be based on market prices.² Then Che pushed further: when revolutionaries in the Third World fighting to overthrow colonial and neo-colonial regimes need guns, the socialist countries must provide them: immediately, at no cost, in whatever quantity needed. “Arms cannot be commodities in our world,” Che proclaimed.³ Che was not speaking in the abstract but referring to the violent political struggles taking place at that very moment: in Vietnam, where the United States would soon escalate a terrifying strategy of mass aerial bombardment, and in the Congo, where Che himself was headed to join the rebellion that followed the US- and Belgium-backed overthrow of Patrice Lumumba.

¹ “En Argelia. Conferencia Afroasiatica,” February 24, 1965, in Ernesto Che Guevara, *Lecturas para la Reflexion 4: Solidaridad e Internacionalismo* (Havana: Ocean Sur, 2013), 67–8.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 77.

Che's comments could be dismissed as the personal opinions of one outspoken maverick, if the sentiment was not echoed in another public forum less than two months later by the leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Kim Il Sung. Speaking in Jakarta on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Bandung Conference, Kim asserted that some of his socialist allies were guilty of "great power chauvinism": the tendency of powerful nations, especially those with an imperial history, to behave in a domineering or paternalistic fashion towards smaller countries and their peoples.⁴ Specifically, Kim criticized the trade structures pushed by Moscow within the socialist camp, arguing that they enforced hierarchy and inequality between the advanced socialist countries and less-developed ones. If the great power chauvinists had their way, Kim argued, countries like North Korea would remain dependent exporters of raw materials, rather than developing stable and independent economies with strong domestic manufacturing capacities.⁵ What Kim's critique inferred was damnatory: the Soviet Union was functioning as an obstacle to the aspirations at the heart of every anti-colonial revolution.

The bold public statements made by Che and Kim in early 1965 reflected new dynamics taking shape within the international communist movement. At the forefront of this challenge were the ruling communist parties of Cuba and North Korea. While made possible by the fall of Fulgencio Batista to Fidel Castro's rebel army in 1959, an alignment between the two states had earlier roots in the Korean War when the first bonds between the WPK and the Latin American Left were forged through networks of solidarity and anti-war activism. In the aftermath of the war, the WPK continued to build relations with leftist parties, trade unions, and civil society actors in Latin America, as it began to see the global South as a crucial battleground of the world revolution. As Cuba became the first country in the Western hemisphere to join the "international socialist system," a bond grew between the Cuban and North Korean leaderships, reflective of their shared history of anti-colonial struggle and their common interests as small countries within a community of socialist states dominated by the Soviet Union and China. A perception of allyship was strengthened by a string of incidents between 1961 and

⁴ "Chosŏn Minjujuŭi Inmin Konghwaguk esŏ ūi sahoejuŭi kŏnsŏl kwa Namjosŏn hyŏngmyŏng taehayŏ" [On Socialist Construction in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the South Korean Revolution], April 14, 1965, in Kim Il Sung, *Chŏnŭp*, vol. 35 (Pyongyang: Korean Workers' Party Publishing House, 2001), 145.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

1964, including the Bay of Pigs invasion, Park Chung Hee's military coup in South Korea, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and as the United States ramped up its military aggression in Vietnam. These events highlighted the immediate military threat the United States posed to both Cuba and North Korea, but also its broader role in crushing the nascent forces of socialism throughout the global South. In this context, political, cultural, and economic cooperation between Havana and Pyongyang grew steadily during the first half of the decade, including Che's historic visit to North Korea in December 1960. By 1965, a nascent Third Worldist tendency affirming its independence from the two major socialist powers was coalescing around North Korea, Cuba, and North Vietnam. While Moscow preached "peaceful coexistence" and Beijing appeared to prioritize its struggle against "Khrushchevite revisionism," the idea was fermenting that it was perhaps those on the frontlines of the anti-imperialist struggle which most clearly recognized the true historic task at hand: the defeat of US imperialism.

I.1 LATIN AMERICA AND THE KOREAN WAR

Three days after North Korean military forces crossed the 38th parallel on the morning of June 25, 1950, the Organization of American States (OAS) passed a resolution affirming that it would stand with the United Nations and the United States in their response to the conflict.⁶ This resolution was followed by pledges of cooperation of one kind or another by the majority of the organization's member states.⁷ Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua made initial offers to send troops, volunteers, or personnel. Other countries suggested material assistance they might provide: Chilean copper and saltpetre, medical supplies from Venezuela, foodstuffs from Nicaragua. Uruguay suggested its citizens' blood plasma could be purchased with US dollars. Panama offered use of its military bases and merchant marine, and to requisition farmland that could feed UN Command troops. In the era of the Truman Doctrine, many Latin American governments had incentive to join the fight against communism and to curry favour with Washington.

These governments' enthusiasm for the war efforts was, however, not always shared by their citizens. On the Caribbean island of Cuba,

⁶ W. H. Chartener, "War Aid from Latin America," in *Editorial Research Reports*, 1950, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1950), CQ Press Library: library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqrsrre1950091800.

⁷ *Ibid.*

the youth arm of the Partido Socialista Popular (Peoples' Socialist Party, PSP) and the Federación Democrática de Mujeres Cubanas (Democratic Federation of Cuban Women, FDMC) led protests when President Carlos Prío Socarrás threatened to send troops to the Korean peninsula.⁸ One young Cuban activist, Candelaria Rodríguez Hernández, was part of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) commission to North Korea in May 1951 to investigate atrocities committed by US forces.⁹ Latin America was further represented on the commission by the Argentine women's activist, Leonor Aguiar Vázquez.¹⁰ Assembling in Shenyang in northeast China, the commission travelled by train to Dandong, where they crossed the Yalu River by a camouflaged boat to the North Korean city of Sinŭiju.¹¹ They later moved on to Pyongyang by jeep, where they were received by Kim Il Sung.¹² Rodríguez related her experience in a pamphlet published by the WIDF shortly after her return, and later described Sinŭiju at the time as "literally a sea of blood."¹³ Rodríguez was arrested and imprisoned upon her return to Cuba, which further galvanized the local anti-war movement.¹⁴

In Brazil, the newly elected Getúlio Vargas (1882–1954), leader of the Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (Brazilian Labour Party, PTB), came under pressure from US President Harry Truman to contribute troops to the war effort.¹⁵ Negotiations between the two administrations generated fierce opposition from the Left, as well as from nationalists within the military.¹⁶

⁸ J. I. Moya Fábregas, "The Cuban Woman's Revolutionary Experience: Patriarchal Culture and the State's Gender Ideology, 1950–1976," *Journal of Women's History* 22, no. 1 (2010): 69.

⁹ The decision to organize the commission was taken at a meeting of the WIDF executive in East Berlin in January 1951. The commission included twenty members and one observer from seventeen different countries and was led by the Canadian Nora K. Rodd. See Monica Felton, *What I Saw in Korea* (self-published, 1951).

¹⁰ *We Accuse! Report of the Committee of the Women's International Democratic Federation in Korea, May 16–27, 1951* (Women's International Democratic Federation, 1951).

¹¹ Felton, *What I Saw*, 4–6.

¹² Candelaria Rodríguez Hernández, *Korea Revisited after 40 Years* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1994), 5–6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁴ Following the Cuban Revolution of 1959 Rodríguez held posts in the Ministry of Labour and Social Security and later became chairwoman of the Lawyer's Association of Havana. In November 1993 she returned to North Korea and met Kim Il Sung, eight months before his death. She was awarded the Order of Friendship First Class by the North Korean government.

¹⁵ Sonny B. Davis, "Brazil-United States Military Relations in the Early Post-World War II Era," *Diálogos* 6 (2002): 25–7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23–8.

The only recently legalized Partido Comunista Brasileiro (Brazilian Communist Party, PCB) launched a massive campaign seeking to move public opinion and encourage dissent with the Brazilian Armed Forces. In August 1950, PCB leader Luís Carlos Prestes (1898–1990) declared: “Nothing, absolutely nothing, for imperialist war! Not one Brazilian soldier to help US aggression in Korea.”¹⁷ In contrast to narratives that saw Korea as the innocent victim of superpower rivalry, the PCB voiced its full support for Pyongyang, drawing a connection between the war and Brazil’s struggle against the political and economic domination of the United States: “The Asian peoples’ struggle against imperialism is an integral part of our own struggle for Brazil’s independence from imperialist rule.”¹⁸ The Brazilian anti-war movement created a long-standing bond between the PCB and the WPK, which would survive the vicissitudes of the Sino-Soviet split in later years. Under pressure from both the Left and pro-US conservatives, Vargas ultimately struck a compromise, refusing to send troops but signing a commercial agreement in December 1951 to provide rare earth elements vital to US war production, such as monazite and cerium salts.¹⁹

The Korean War was also central to the political turmoil that rocked Puerto Rico in the early 1950s. The conflict came at a time when Luis Muñoz Marín (1898–1980), the first elected governor of the island, was leading the campaign for Public Law 500. If endorsed in a Puerto Rican referendum, this act of the US congress would end direct colonial rule and make the island a “Free Associated State” with its own flag, constitution, and limited autonomy. The “commonwealth formula,” as it was called, was seen as a third way between Puerto Rico’s existing colonial status and full independence. In this context, Muñoz Marín and many others along the political spectrum – including the Socialist Party – believed that the participation of Puerto Rico’s 65th Infantry Regiment, the *Borinqueneers*, in the Korean War would accelerate decolonization.²⁰ Politicians and journalists argued that joining the war effort would prove to Washington that Puerto Ricans were neither racially inferior nor less committed to the anti-communist cause, and hence worthy of greater self-government. It was also hoped that involvement in the war would serve as a much-needed

¹⁷ Luís Carlos Prestes, quoted in Jayme Ribeiro, “O PCB e a Guerra da Coréia: Memória, História e Imaginário Social,” *História e Perspectivas* 42 (January–June 2010): 216–17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Vagner Camilo Alves, *Da Itália à Coréia: decisoes sobre ir ou nao à guerra* (Belo Horizonte: UFMg, 2007), 171–4.

²⁰ Harry Franqui-Rivera, *Soldiers of the Nation: Military Service and Modern Puerto Rico, 1869–1952* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 180–4.

economic boon to the island, and the salaries and benefits of the US Armed Forces were extremely attractive in a society marked by poverty and high unemployment. A total of 43,434 Puerto Ricans, from both the island and the continental United States, served in Korea.²¹ Nor were Puerto Ricans the only Latinos fighting with the US Armed Forces. Although the US Department of Defense did not maintain statistics on the matter, first- or later-generation Latin American immigrants volunteered and were conscripted in large numbers as the war progressed, and largely or majority Latino units were not unheard of.²² The majority of these soldiers were Chicanos (Mexican Americans) born or raised in the United States, many of whom saw service in the war as a path to escape poverty and prove their worth in a society that treated them as second-class citizens.²³

Not all Puerto Ricans supported Public Law 500 or participation in the Korean War. As US troops were reaching Pyongyang in October 1950, there were nationalist uprisings in several Puerto Rican cities, eventually put down by the US military and Puerto Rican National Guard, with dozens killed and hundreds arrested. We can only speculate how the course of the war may have changed if Puerto Rican nationalists had succeeded in their assassination attempt on President Truman the following month. At the University of Puerto Rico during the 1950s, students fought pitched battles with police over US military efforts to recruit on campus.²⁴ Such solidarity was reciprocated with North Korea's strident support for Puerto Rican independence in subsequent decades, and nationalist leaders like Marta Sánchez Olmeda and Rafael Anglada López were frequently hosted in Pyongyang by Kim Il Sung.

When Free Associated Statehood was adopted in July 1952, the new flag and a copy of the new constitution were shipped to the Puerto Rican soldiers in South Korea. There is an obvious irony in the fact that in the Korean War, North Korean soldiers, pro-communist partisans in the South, and Chinese "volunteers," who believed they were fighting against imperialism, were pitted against poor Puerto Ricans who had been told they were helping to liberate their homeland from colonial rule, and working-class Chicanos clinging to faith in the American dream. The contradictions of how nationalism, race, and empire intersected in the

²¹ Ibid., 186.

²² Steven Rosales, *Soldados Razos at War: Chicano Politics, Identity and Masculinity in the U.S. Military from World War II to Vietnam* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Marta Sánchez Olmeda, *Los Movimientos Independentistas en Puerto Rico y su Permeabilidad en la Clase Obrera* (Río Piedras: Editorial Edil, 1990), 123.

war are captured by an anecdote related by Henry Franqui-Rivera. He cites a Puerto Rican corporal who, after being released from two years of imprisonment in a prisoner-of-war camp, told a US reporter that his Chinese captors “often tell me about big trouble and revolution in Puerto Rico because American [*sic*] exploits masses. I tell them I am American and they are liars.”²⁵ Such fragments coexist alongside the bitter reflections of Chicano veterans documented by scholars like William Arce and Steven Rosales.²⁶ After enduring racism from white soldiers and superiors during the war, in which they were often chosen first for the most unpleasant or dangerous tasks, Chicano servicemen returned to the United States only to find that the realities of discrimination and dismal employment opportunities had not changed for them.²⁷ On the other hand, Chicano veterans, conscious of the sacrifice they made in Korea, were also less likely to passively accept second-class citizenship. Rosales cites the Korean War as a pivotal moment in the development of Mexican-American identity and political mobilization, as many veterans went on to play important roles in the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Colombia was the sole independent Latin American nation to participate in the Korean War, sending 4,314 troops in May 1951.²⁸ Recently elected President Laureno Gomez (1889–1965) did not need congressional approval, as Colombia was under martial law in response to the decade-long conflict known as La Violencia (1948–1958).²⁹ A man of fascist sympathies and encouraged by promises of US economic aid, Gomez articulated Colombia’s involvement as a heroic crusade in defence of “Christian civilization.”³⁰ However, the impact of *el Batallón Colombia* on the course of the war was likely less than that of the war on Colombia. Not only did it result in a massive influx of US military aid, but the war also served as a training ground in anti-communist ideology and counter-insurgency methods that would later be adapted to Colombian soil. Alberto Ruiz Novoa (1917–2017), one of the commanders of Colombian forces in Korea, became head of the National Army in 1960 before being appointed Minister of Defence under the conservative administration of

²⁵ Rosales, *Soldados Razos at War*, 195.

²⁶ *Ibid.*; William Arce, *Nation in Uniform: Chicano/Latino War Narratives and the Construction of Nation in the Korean War and Vietnam War* (PhD Diss., University of Southern California, 2009).

²⁷ Rosales, *Soldados Razos at War*; Arce, *Nation in Uniform*.

²⁸ Bradley Lynn Coleman, “The Colombian Army in Korea, 1950–1954,” *The Journal of Military History* 69, no. 4 (2005): 1164–5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1141–2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1146.

Guillermo León Valencia (1909–1971) in 1962. The famous Colombian scholar Germán Arciniegas Angueyra (1900–1999) accused President Gomez of exploiting the war to obtain massive quantities of arms from the United States, which subsequently were never fired in Korea but rather used for the pacification of the Colombian countryside. “We do not know how many Colombians the reds have killed in Korea so far, but we know that in Colombia the dead has reached fifty thousand,”³¹ Arciniegas remarked. The Peruvian journalist Genaro Carnero Checa (1930–2010) – later a stalwart of the international DPRK solidarity movement – drew the connection between the Korean War and the Colombian military’s brutal counter-insurgency operations in subsequent years. Colombian soldiers “returned to their homeland as the enemy of their own people, trained by the United States in the war against liberty. Is it then strange that those soldiers murdered peasants, burned villages and crops, and are photographed smiling next to the decapitated corpses of their compatriots?”³² The most well-known critic of Colombian participation in the war, the politician and journalist Gilberto Zapata Isaza (1913–2009), also went on to become a leading figure in the DPRK solidarity movement, as general secretary of both the Colombia–Korea Friendship and Culture Association, and the Latin American and Caribbean Regional Committee to Support the Independent and Peaceful Reunification of Korea. He was a regular guest of Kim Il Sung in Pyongyang until the latter’s death in 1994, treated as the true representative of Colombia, a country whose government never recognized the DPRK.³³

Even in countries where young men being sent to fight in Korea was not an immediate threat, the war had a powerful impact. The writings of internationally prominent critics of the US intervention like I. F. Stone, Claude Bourdet, E. N. Dzelepy, Wilfred G. Burchett, and Alan Winnington were translated into Spanish and published in Latin America.³⁴ The communist-dominated International Union of Students (IUS), which had affiliates

³¹ Germán Arciniegas, *Entre la Libertad y el Miedo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1952), 238.

³² Genaro Carnero Checa, *El Aguila Rampante: El Imperialismo Yanqui Sobre América Latina* (Ciudad de México: Editorial Stylo, 1956), 89.

³³ José Raúl Jaramillo Restrepo, Vice President of la Universidad Autónoma Latinoamericana (UNAULA), interview with the author, July 13, 2015, Medellín.

³⁴ I. F. Stone, *La historia oculta de la guerra de Corea* (Ciudad de México: Sociedad de Estudios Internacionales, 1952); E. N. Dzelepy, I. F. Stone, and Claude Bourdet, *La Guerra de Corea* (Buenos Aires: Prensa Libre, 1952); Wilfred Burchett and Alan Winnington, *Koje unscreened* (London: Britain-China Friendship Association, 1953).

at university campuses across Latin America, rallied opposition to the war and published a Spanish edition of *Students and the War in Korea* in 1951. This quite remarkable book was simultaneously a primer in Korean history, a scathing indictment of the US-led intervention, a report on the South Korean student movement since 1945, and an overview of the achievements of socialism in North Korea, particularly in the fields of education.³⁵ The World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), whose Latin American affiliate was the Confederación de los Trabajadores de América Latina (Confederation of Workers of Latin America, CTAL), called on all workers to oppose the US-led intervention and organized an annual “International Week of Solidarity” with Korea each July during the war.³⁶

The fact that Washington succeeded in convincing only a single government to contribute troops testifies to the political climate of the time. There was widespread hostility towards the United States stemming from its long history of military interventions and support for corrupt and brutal regimes. The end of the Second World War signalled an abandonment of the so-called Good Neighbour Policy, as Washington decision-makers affirmed the need for heavy-handed measures to secure their interests in the region. While billed by its architects as a UN “police action,” the Korean War was widely seen as a unilateral act of unjustified military aggression to secure US geopolitical interests, something Latin Americans had witnessed many times before. For a generation of the Left, the Korean War demonstrated the fundamentally criminal role the United States played in the world, a sentiment reinforced when less than a year after the armistice, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)–created mercenary army overthrew the democratically elected government of Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala. The field commander for the covert operation was in fact Albert R. Haney, brought over from Seoul, where he had been CIA station chief during the war.

I.2 PYONGYANG LOOKS TOWARDS LATIN AMERICA

As Korea grabbed the attention of Latin America in the 1950s, so too did Latin America become of increasing interest to the North Korean leadership. The WPK issued a statement on the Tenth Inter-American Conference in Caracas in March 1954, praising the recent Bolivian and Guatemalan revolutions and condemning Washington’s “greedy,

³⁵ *Students and the War in Korea* (Prague: International Union of Students, 1951).

³⁶ *The World Federation of Trade Unions, 1945–1985* (Prague: World Federation of Trade Unions and PRACE Czechoslovak Trade Unions, 1989), 64–5.

callous, despoiling, aggressive policy” towards the region.³⁷ Latin American opposition to the Korean War meant that when the war ended in 1953, the WPK had a network of supporters and sympathizers across the region. Delegations of students, journalists, and communist youth organizations that had spoken out against the war were invited to Pyongyang in the latter half of the 1950s. These included the Argentine sociologist Carlos Strasser, the Mexican anthropologist and journalist Gregorio Rosas Herrera, and the Chilean communist youth leader Alfredo Urria. Official North Korean organizations like the Korean Federation of Trade Unions (KFTU), the Korean Journalists Union (KJU), and the Korean Democratic Youth League (KDYL) sought to expand relations with their counterparts in Latin America through written correspondence and exchanging delegations. The KFTU was particularly active in this regard, cultivating partnerships with Latin American trade unions and issuing protest letters over the treatment of workers and the persecution of labour organizers. For example, the KFTU spoke out against the 1955 arrest of Guatemalan trade unionist and PGT leader Bernardo Alvarado Monzón (1925–1972),³⁸ and voiced its support for the ongoing struggles of Cuban sugar and tobacco workers in early 1957.³⁹ Young North Koreans and Latin Americans were also brought together via the many international gatherings of the IUS, the WIDF, and the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY). The WFDY’s “International Day of Solidarity with Youth and Students against Colonialism” was celebrated in the DPRK each February with events at schools and worksites across the country. While it is well known that Moscow hosted the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in July 1957, less known is that the KDYL held its own international youth gathering three months later in Pyongyang. KCNA press releases from the time described how these visitors were treated to tours of “construction sites, factories and educational establishments in Pyongyang, as well as rural and fishing villages.”⁴⁰ While clearly a smaller-scale affair than the Moscow festival, it is significant that all the visiting delegations were from Asia and countries in

³⁷ “U.S. Pushes Latin American dependence,” KCNA, April 1, 1954, Readex collection, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, 1941–1996*.

³⁸ “Protest to Guatemala,” KCNA, October 25, 1955, Readex collection, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, 1941–1996*.

³⁹ “Letter to Cuba,” KCNA, February 21, 1957, Readex collection, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, 1941–1996*.

⁴⁰ “Argentine Youths Leave,” KCNA, September 23, 1957, Readex collection, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, 1941–1996*.

the global South: Cuba, Chile, Argentina, Sudan, Indonesia, and Japan. The joint statement by the KDYL and the Japanese delegation celebrated the “spirit of Bandung” and called for solidarity between the peoples of Asia and Africa to “destroy colonialism at its foundation and to defend world peace.”⁴¹

The ties being built between the WPK and the Latin American Left during the 1950s were part of the North Korean leadership’s growing interest in the global South as a site of revolutionary change, inspired by the wave of anti-colonial revolt that had followed the Second World War. Events such as the outbreak of armed national liberation struggle in Vietnam and Algeria, India’s declaration of independence from the British Empire, the Chinese Revolution of 1949, the Suez Crisis, the triumph of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, all appeared to signal a tectonic shift in the global balance of forces. Although neither North nor South Korea were invited to the Bandung Conference of April 1955, North Korea was represented at the numerous Asian and Third World solidarity conferences organized in the late 1940s and 1950s. They included Beijing’s Asian Women’s Conference of December 1949, the Asian Conference on the Relaxation of International Tension in New Delhi in 1955, and the founding of the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) in Cairo in December 1957. The famous writer and WPK Central Committee member Han Sörya was elected to AAPSO’s executive in April 1960, joining such notable figures as Patrice Lumumba, Jaramogi Odinga, Joshua Nkomo, and Mehdi Ben Barka. While Han himself was purged from the WPK in 1962, North Korea retained its seat on the AAPSO executive council and continued to play a significant role in the organization and the plethora of conferences it organized in the late 1950s and early 1960s. For example, the CIA reported that Pyongyang led the socialist states in advocating for solidarity with the Algerian independence struggle at the 1957 Cairo meeting,⁴² helped pay for AAPSO’s April 1961 executive committee meeting in Bandung, and sat on the preparatory committee for the 1962 Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Cairo.⁴³

⁴¹ “Japan, DPRK Youth Issue Statement,” KCNA, October 13, 1957, Readex collection, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, 1941–1996*.

⁴² *The Afro-Asian Conference: An Analysis of Communist Strategy and Tactics*, CIA report, October 1958, 16, Appendix I, 8, FOIA Electronic Reading Room: www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-00915R001000290043-2.pdf.

⁴³ *The Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization from April 1960 – April 1961*, CIA report, June 15, 1961, FOIA Electronic Reading Room: www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-00915R001300050007-5.pdf.

North Korean involvement in the global South in the 1950s should not be overstated. In these years, the WPK still professed a relatively heterodox pro-Soviet line, and its relations with governments outside of the socialist camp were few. Opposition to colonialism was the unanimous position of the international communist movement. On the other hand, the WPK's vocal support for national liberation movements and Third World solidarity also foreshadowed the more radical and unorthodox Third Worldist position that would emerge from the party leadership in the 1960s.

If the WPK was on such a trajectory from its inception, this may be explained with reference to history. In 1945, Korea was a predominantly agrarian society emerging from thirty-five years of colonial rule under the Japanese Empire. Five years later, Kim Il Sung's bid to reunify the peninsula through military force triggered a horrific military invasion by an international coalition led by the United States, which razed the country to the ground, killed some two million people and left a generation psychologically scarred.⁴⁴ The political maturation of the WPK was also shaped by a deeply unequal and at times humiliating relationship between Korean communists and their Russian and Chinese comrades.⁴⁵ This history does much to explain why the WPK emerged from the Korean War to identify with the nationalist awakening taking place throughout the global South, combined with a visceral anti-Americanism and a strong desire to assert its independence within the socialist camp. From the perspective of the WPK, the southern half of Korea was under the colonial occupation of the United States and, like other peoples around the world, the Korean people were now tasked with a national liberation struggle. This was not a fanciful interpretation of conditions in the South. As Bruce Cumings has documented, the southern half of the peninsula was aflame in guerrilla resistance and civilian uprisings during 1945–1950, which were drowned in blood during brutal counterinsurgency operations conducted by US and ROK military forces.⁴⁶

This situation made the central goal of the WPK clear: to “complete the Korean revolution” by expelling US troops from the South, overthrowing

⁴⁴ Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2011), 35.

⁴⁵ Kim Ŭngsŏ, “1960 nyŏndae chungban Puk'an ŭi chajuogyonosŏn ch'aet'aegŏ kwanhan yŏn'gu” [A study of North Korea's Adoption of a Self-Reliant Foreign Policy in the Mid-1960s], *Segyejŏngch'i* [Journal of World Politics] 16 (2012), 244–6.

⁴⁶ Cumings, *The Korean War*, 116–39.

what it saw as an illegitimate puppet regime in Seoul, and unifying the peninsula under its leadership. The WPK's strategy for accomplishing unification was in essence three-fold: continue to build and fortify socialism in the North, support the revolutionary movement in the South, and align in solidarity with the international revolutionary movement. It is in this last regard that the North Korean leadership came to see the global South as having an increasingly important role to play.

The WPK's increasingly nationalist and Third Worldist orientation was also influenced by the desire of Kim Il Sung and his followers to solidify their hold over the party. In the aftermath of the Korean War, Kim was threatened by rival factions critical of his growing personality cult and his economic policies. These critics had closer ties to the Soviet and Chinese communist parties, and for Kim, raised fears about how Moscow and Beijing might interfere in the WPK's internal affairs to the benefit of his enemies.⁴⁷ Kim responded in a December 1955 speech, "On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Chuch'e in Ideological Work," best known as Kim's first public presentation of his concept of Chuch'e.⁴⁸ Kim attacked those within the party who allegedly wished to slavishly emulate foreign models and who failed to realize Marxism–Leninism must be creatively applied to Korean conditions. He argued that the WPK should embrace traditional Korean culture, which was necessary to connect with the masses (including those living in the South) and to build the kind of pride and patriotism the young republic needed.⁴⁹ Kim painted a picture of struggle between patriotic "revolutionaries" – the former guerrillas who had fought under his command – and petit-bourgeois intellectuals who admonished all things foreign and were out of touch with ordinary people. Internal party tension came to a climax in August 1956, when Kim's leadership was challenged at the WPK's central committee plenary session. Kim, who had prior warning of the attack, countered with a major purge of the WPK leadership, resulting in several top cadres being expelled from the party and subsequently seeking refuge in China and the Soviet Union. From 1956 onwards, the North Korean leadership increasingly stressed the WPK's independence within the international communist

⁴⁷ Kim, "Puk'an ūi chajuoeogyonosŏn ch'aet'aegŏ," 245–6.

⁴⁸ Traditionally translated in the English literature as the Juche Idea or Chuche Idea, and in Spanish as la Idea Zuche. Chuch'e has no exact equivalent in English or Spanish, but the imperfect approximations traditionally used have been "self-reliance" and "autoconfianza."

⁴⁹ Kim, "1960 nyŏndae chungban Puk'an ūi chajuoeogyonosŏn," 245–6.

movement, embraced heavily nationalist rhetoric, and strove to build new allies within the global South.⁵⁰

On September 8, 1958, the DPRK celebrated its tenth anniversary. In a speech prepared for the occasion, Premier Kim Il Sung gave an assessment of the state of world affairs filled with optimism. “The basic characteristic of the current crisis,” he explained, “is that socialism is winning decisively on the world stage and the forces of imperialism are weakening all the more, heading towards their downfall.”⁵¹ The socialist camp, which now encompassed one-third of the earth’s population, was surpassing the capitalist countries in its economic and technological development, symbolized dramatically by the recent successful launching of the Sputnik earth satellites. The advanced capitalist societies of the West were mired in economic crisis and the ranks of the unemployed swelled higher each day. The aggressive imperialism of the United States, “the heinous enemy of humanity” (illy-üüi hyungak’an wõnssu) was increasingly exposed and isolated, no longer able to rely on the support of the United Nations, as demonstrated in the ongoing Lebanon Crisis. Of particular importance, however, was the tide of anti-colonial revolt which was sweeping the global South. “The time when the imperialists could exploit and rule over the peoples of colonial and dependent countries as they pleased has passed,” Kim declared. More than 700 million people had “cast off the yoke of colonial slavery” since the end of the Second World War, and while colonialism was largely moribund in Asia, “the flames of national liberation struggle” were burning across Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.” In the midst of this global upsurge, Kim affirmed that “proletarian internationalism lies at the base of our country’s foreign policy” and claimed the DPRK was “actively supporting the national liberation movements of colonial peoples.” In the following weeks Pyongyang announced its first diplomatic relations outside of the socialist camp: the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale’s (FLN) newly established government-in-exile based in Cairo, and the Republic of Guinea, after the West African nation declared independence under the leadership of Ahmed Sékou Touré in October.⁵²

⁵⁰ On the events of 1955–1956, see Kim Ŭngsõ, “1960 nyõndae chungban Puk’an üi chajuoeogyonosõn,” 249–54; Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007).

⁵¹ *Rodong Sinmun* [Workers’ Daily], September 9, 1958.

⁵² Mo Soon Young and Jeon Young Sun, “Puk’an munhwa hyõpchõngüi chõn’gae yangsang kwa kü t’ükching – kwangbok ihubut’õ 1950 nyõndaerül chungsimüro” [The Development of the North Korean Cultural Agreement and Its Characteristics, from Independence to the 1950s], *T’ongirimmunhak* [The Journal of the Humanities for Unification] 55 (May 2013), 221.

1.3 THE CUBAN REVOLUTION

As Kim delivered his speech in Pyongyang, on the other side of the world Ernesto “Che” Guevara and his column of rebel fighters pushed ahead in their hellish, forty-two-day, 300-kilometre trek through swamp and mountains from the Sierra Maestra to Las Villas province. They were malnourished, sick, and exhausted, battered by rain, bogged down in mud, and frequently under fire from Batista’s soldiers and warplanes. The column eventually reached its destination in the Escambray mountains on October 16, albeit with its ranks depleted. Che set about forging the disparate rebel bands operating in the area into a cohesive force under his command. On New Year’s Eve, the combined forces of Che and Camilo Cienfuegos took the provincial capital of Santa Clara after three days of intense fighting, prompting Batista to board a plane for the Dominican Republic. Two days later, the rebels arrived in Havana, greeted by ecstatic crowds, to proclaim the revolution triumphant.

When Fidel Castro’s rebel army seized power at the dawn of 1959, it was by no means clear that Pyongyang had a new ally in the Americas. The new Cuban government strove for amicable relations with the US government, and Fidel had always denied he was a communist. Cuba in fact recognized the South Korean government and voted in favour of the US-sponsored resolution on “the Korean question” at the fourteenth UN General Assembly in December 1959. This would be the last time, however. Cuba’s revolutionary leadership was not content with piecemeal reforms, but rather envisioned fundamental, structural changes that could transform the lives of the majority. Change of such depth necessitated a radical redistribution of wealth and property, including bringing economic resources dominated by US capital under national control. Moreover, Cuba immediately became a base of operations for Latin American rebels who wanted to oust their own dictators just as the Cubans had toppled Batista, and now had the backing of the Cuban state. Lastly, those who had expected revolution would bring a Western-style democracy saw Fidel as attempting to establish a personal dictatorship. It soon became clear that the aims of the new government, while supported by the majority of Cubans, would not be met with the cooperation of the island’s elites, or even substantial portions of the educated middle class. Such Cubans fled the island in droves, and some enlisted in various unsuccessful schemes to overthrow the Fidelistas. Some of the most reactionary and violent strands of this resistance had the backing of the US government, culminating in the Bay of Pigs debacle of April 1961,

when a military force made up of Cuban exiles and a small number of US soldiers – organized, trained, and armed by the CIA – attempted an ill-fated invasion of the island. It is no coincidence that it was during the siege that Fidel explicitly defined Cuba’s revolution as socialist for the first time.⁵³ In short, with Batista defeated, it soon became evident that the dominant faction within the revolution, centred around Fidel, could not meet its goals within a democratic-reformist framework, nor could it avoid a confrontation with US power. This situation demanded new ideas, new methods, and new allies that could ensure the revolution’s victory in the face of such monumental challenges.

Because of the historic links stemming from Cuban opposition to the Korean War, the WPK was represented at two important political conferences that helped define the emerging trajectory of the Cuban revolution. At the First Latin American Congress of Youth in July–August 1960 in Havana, Che laid out several aspects of his political thinking that would provide common ground for the Cuban and North Korean communist parties during the 1960s. Rural-based guerrilla warfare, backed by the peasant masses, was the optimal strategy for revolutionary movements in the global South. Moreover, these movements must take on an indigenous and popular character. In Cuba, they built their revolution “without worrying about labels, without checking what others were saying about her, but constantly examining what the people of Cuba wanted from her” Che explained. “If it is the case that this revolution is Marxist [...] it is because the revolution also discovered, by its own methods, the road pointed out by Marx.”⁵⁴ Che also gave voice to the fiercely independent streak running through the Cuban Revolution that resembled the Chuch’e ethos of its North Korean allies:

We know what is to be done. If [other countries] want to do it, fine; if they don’t want to do it, that’s up to them. But we cannot accept others’ counsel, because we were here on our own until the last moment, standing, awaiting the direct aggression of the mightiest power in the capitalist world, and we did not ask for help from anyone. We were prepared, here, together with our people, to endure until the very end the consequences of our rebellion.⁵⁵

⁵³ “Discurso pronunciado por Fidel Castro Ruz, Presidente de Doble República de Cuba, en las honras fúnebres de las víctimas del bombardeo a distintos puntos de la república, efectuado en 23 y 12, frente al cementerio de Colón, el día 16 de abril de 1961,” El Portal Cuba: www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1961/esp/160461e.html.

⁵⁴ “Discurso en el acto de apertura del Primer Congreso Latinoamericano de Juventudes, el 28 de Julio de 1960,” in Ernesto Che Guevara, *Obras 1957–1967* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1970), 390–402.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

The following month, a WPK delegation attended the PSP's Eighth Party Congress, the first held since the overthrow of Batista. The PSP leadership maintained that as Cuba was a "semi-feudal" country, its revolution was not proletarian-socialist but rather a "patriotic and democratic national liberation and agrarian revolution."⁵⁶ While these conditions, the PSP argued, made possible an alliance between all "patriotic" classes, including the national bourgeoisie, it was the fate of the proletariat to play a leadership role and advance the revolution to its next logical stage: the transition to socialism. At the Congress, general secretary Blas Roca (1908–1987) made the historic call for the PSP – Cuba's historic communist party – to fuse with the Movimiento 26 de Julio (July 26 Movement, M-26-7), the left-nationalist movement led by Fidel. This merger process eventually led to the creation of the Partido Comunista de Cuba (Communist Party of Cuba, PCC) in October 1965.

Taken together, these events signalled that the revolution was acquiring two important characteristics that would shape the future of Cuba–DPRK relations. First, Cuba was on its way to becoming the first country in the Western hemisphere to join the "international socialist system," as Fidel asserted during the Bay of Pigs invasion. And secondly, the Cuban leadership believed its victory over the Batista regime was only the first step in a still unfolding continental revolution against US imperialism, one in which it would play a leading role.

I.4 CUBA–DPRK BILATERAL RELATIONS

North Korea established formal diplomatic relations with Cuba on August 29, 1960, three months after the Soviet Union and a month before China.⁵⁷ The announcement took place in Havana during the visit by the North Korean delegation that had arrived several weeks earlier for the PSP's Eighth Congress, headed by senior officials Han Sangtu (1910–?) and Pak Sŏngch'ŏl (1913–2008).⁵⁸ The delegation also concluded a cultural cooperation agreement to exchange delegations of scientists,

⁵⁶ Blas Roca, quoted in Samuel Farber, "The Cuban Communists in the Early Stages of the Cuban Revolution: Revolutionaries or Reformists?" *Latin American Research Review* 18, no. 1 (1983): 65.

⁵⁷ "Puk'an-K'uba kwan'gye" [North Korea–Cuba relations], 1960–62, document no. 883, Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea.

⁵⁸ Han was a veteran of the red peasant union movement elected to the Presidium of the Politburo in the 1950s. Pak was one of Kim's Manchurian partisans who went on to serve as DPRK chief foreign minister, premier, and vice president of the Supreme People's Assembly.

educators, and writers, cooperate in the fields of athletics, radio broadcasting, and journalism, and arrange visiting art exhibitions.⁵⁹ North Korea's first resident ambassador, Hong Tongch'öl (1905–1990), arrived the following January.⁶⁰

A flurry of bilateral activity followed the August agreement. In October, Cuban Ministry of Health officials visited North Korea to study its healthcare system and identify areas for cooperation, while a North Korean trade union delegation visited Havana for an Algerian solidarity conference organized by the WFTU. Ending the month, representatives of the Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes (Association of Rebel Youth, AJR), the youth arm of the M-26-7, were invited to Pyongyang by the KDYL. At a large evening event with young North Koreans in Sinch'ön County, AJR leader Fernando Ravelo Renedo⁶¹ declared: “Now we are waging a common struggle. [...] Let us become comrades-in-arms who go to Cuba from Korea and come to Korea from Cuba if need be.”⁶²

Such activity was the lead up to Che's historic visit to the DPRK in December 1960, part of a two-month tour of the socialist world. Although Che was accompanied for much of the trip by Soviet foreign officer and intelligence agent Nikolai Leonov, when the two arrived in Pyongyang they were immediately separated, reflecting the thorny relationship by then prevailing between Pyongyang and Moscow.⁶³ Amongst mass rallies, grand banquets, and factory tours, including the site of the famous Vinylon factory in Hamhŭng as it approached completion, the over-arching theme of the diplomatic celebrations was that the Korean and Cuban peoples had a shared history of anti-colonial struggle, and a common enemy in US imperialism. This was precisely

⁵⁹ “Puk'an-K'uba kwan'gye.”

⁶⁰ Born to a poor peasant family in Hamgyōngnam province, Hong migrated to the Soviet Union in 1925, eventually enlisting in the Soviet navy, and studying at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) in Moscow. Later, he was active in the anti-Japanese underground in Seoul, for which he was arrested and sentenced to ten years in Sōdaemun prison in 1940. Following liberation, he became head of the WPK party committee of Hwanghae province and went on to have a long career in the diplomatic service.

⁶¹ Fernando Ravelo Renedo fought in the guerrilla front led by Raúl Castro during the revolution. He subsequently served as an intelligence agent, diplomat, and foreign affairs official, closely involved in Cuba's relations with Latin American revolutionary groups. Some sources implicated him in narcotrafficking activities, and he was indicted by a Miami court in November 1982. He died in June 2017.

⁶² “Cuban group tours S. Hwanghae area,” KCNA, October 31, 1960, *Readex collection, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, 1941–1996*.

⁶³ Jon Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*, first revised edition (New York: Grove Press, 2010), 467.

why, *Rodong Sinmun* explained, both peoples grasped the fundamental importance of international solidarity and fraternal cooperation.⁶⁴ Che visited the Hwanghae Iron and Steel Complex, where he was greeted by workers chanting “*Cuba sí, yanquis no!*” and singing the M-26-7 anthem.⁶⁵ Behind the scenes, the two sides negotiated the signing of several agreements on trade, banking, scientific and technical cooperation, and cultural exchange. This included a North Korean commitment to purchase 20,000 tons of the 1960 sugar crop, while the Cubans received machine presses, mining equipment, and “all kinds of machinery,” according to Che.⁶⁶

Interviewed on Cuban television upon his return, Che remarked that out of all the countries he visited on his trip, “Korea is one of the most extraordinary. Perhaps the one that impressed us the most of all.”⁶⁷ For Che, what he saw and learnt in North Korea confirmed the utter depravity of the US empire, but also the incredible possibilities for the developing world when the masses had both a high level of revolutionary consciousness and solid leadership. He was moved by war-time photos of Koreans – “people filled with hate, that hatred of the people when it reaches the deepest part of their being” – who for two years endured “an orgy of death,” in what might have been “the most barbaric systematic destruction ever implemented anywhere.”⁶⁸ He relayed gruesome accounts of US soldiers who slaughtered children with flamethrowers and poison gas, tore foetuses from the stomachs of pregnant women with bayonets, and pilots who, when there was nothing left to destroy, took to carpet bombing oxherds. And yet today, North Korea was a modern, industrialized republic, able to provide its entire population with quality social services and amenities that were rare in most developing countries.

Che’s visit at the end of 1960 initiated a decade of exceptionally close cooperation between Havana and Pyongyang. According to Lois Pérez Leira, Che developed a particularly close relationship with North Korean ambassador Hong, “always having time to dedicate to him, to discuss issues related to his country.”⁶⁹ During the first half of the 1960s, DPRK–Cuba bilateral activity often fell under the umbrella of cultural and

⁶⁴ *Rodong Sinmun* [Workers’ Daily], December 1, 1960.

⁶⁵ *Revolución*, December 6, 1960.

⁶⁶ *Revolución*, February 7, 1961.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Lois Pérez Leira, “Ernesto Guevara y la República Democrática Popular de Corea,” *Kaosenlared*: kaosenlared.net/ernesto-guevara-y-la-rep-blica-democr-tica-popular-de-corea.

scientific cooperation, with exchanges in fields as diverse as ballet, basketball, music, poetry, film, civil aviation, healthcare, education, childcare, radio broadcasting, journalism, and architecture. As scholars Mo Soon Young and Jeon Young Sun have examined, such cooperation reflected North Korean ideas about foreign diplomacy, in which exchanges in the fields of art, culture, and science in particular could both strengthen solidarity and demonstrate what socialism offered the goal of human development.⁷⁰ Economic and technical cooperation flourished as well, and such projects, given extensive coverage in the Cuban press, introduced a new word into the Cuban lexicon: *Ch'öllima*, translated from Chosŏnmal into Spanish as *Chullima* or *Shullima*. A mythological winged horse of Korean folklore, it was adopted as the symbol of a campaign launched by the North Korean state in the late 1950s which urged citizens to work harder and sacrifice in order to exceed production quotas and accelerate industrialization. It reflected the strong voluntarist current within North Korean economic policy, which endowed the masses with the power to transform objective reality through grandiose feats of collective labour.⁷¹

North Korea made a substantial contribution to the modernization of Cuba's fishing industry, one of the central development goals of the 1960s with which Fidel was involved personally.⁷² In August 1962, Che and Ambassador Hong presided over the inauguration of the Ch'öllima Shipyard (*Astillero Chullima*) on Havana's Almendares River.⁷³ The date was chosen in recognition of National Liberation Day in North Korea – the anniversary of liberation from Japanese rule. Presented as a sister-factory to the Sinp'o Shipyard in North Korea's Hamgyŏngnam province, vessels produced at the facility included the Lambda 75, a traditional staple of Cuba's fishing fleet, as well as the first domestically manufactured trawler.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Mo Soon Young and Jeon Young Sun, "Puk'an munhwa hyŏpchŏngüi chŏn'gae yangsang kwa kü t'ükching," 235–40; Chung Tae Soo, "Puk'an yŏnghwa üi kukche kyoryu kwan'gye yŏn'gu (1945–1972): Soryŏn Tong Yurŏp üi" [A Study of International Exchanges in North Korean Films (1945–1972): Focusing on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe], *Yŏnghwayŏn'gu* [Film Studies] 86 (2020): 77–113.

⁷¹ "Chosŏn Minjujuüi Inmin Konghwaguk esŏ üi sahojuüi könsŏl kwa Namjosŏn hyŏngmyŏng taehayŏ" [On Socialist Construction in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the South Korean Revolution] April 14, 1965, in Kim Il Sung, *Chŏn'jip*, vol. 35 (Pyongyang: WPK Publishing House, 2001).

⁷² Ian T. Joyce, *The Fisheries of the Cuban Insular Shelf: Culture, History and Revolutionary Performance* (PhD Diss., Simon Fraser University, April 1996).

⁷³ *Granma*, July 4, 1969, 1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; Edgar P. Young, "Cuba's Fishing Revolution," *Fishing News International* 6, no. 6 (June 1967): 25.

Two months later, the Cuban Missile Crisis erupted, with the revelation of the existence of Soviet-built ballistic missile launching facilities in Cuba. In response to the US naval blockade of the island, Pyongyang announced an all-out, nation-wide labour mobilization to aid the Cuban people. The workers of the Korean-Cuban Friendship Factory in Pyongyang, it was reported, had increased production by 30 percent in order to meet their annual production goal early and produce an additional ten tons of steel nuts and 60,000 textile machine parts for Cuba. The bulletin of the North Korean embassy in Havana carried stories of workers and youth across the country forming Ch'öllima Brigades to accelerate production and meet annual quotas early, thereby allowing them to produce extra steel parts, disc harrows, machine tools, and electric components for Cuba. It featured interviews with factory workers who had forfeited their annual vacations and housewives inspired to join their husbands on the assembly line night shift in solidarity with their Cuban brothers and sisters.⁷⁵

When Cuba was struck by Hurricane Flora in October 1963, one of the deadliest Atlantic hurricanes of modern times, the DPRK sent a cargo ship of relief supplies including 5,000 tons of rice, five tractors, tools, and medicines, greeted by cheering crowds at the port of Isabela de Sagua.⁷⁶ In December 1963, Pyongyang announced it was sending eighty North Korean metallurgy technicians to Cuba, the first of many teams of experts sent to the island during the decade.⁷⁷ In the early 1960s, North Korea also provided scholarships to young Cubans to study or receive technical training in Pyongyang and Kusŏng, where they joined a community of international students mostly from Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe.

The North Korean government's determination to provide such levels of support at a time when it faced serious economic challenges of its own testifies to the great importance it placed on the new-born relationship. Indeed, the WPK leadership saw the Cuban Revolution as being of immense historical and political importance, the "first rupture in the US

⁷⁵ "En respaldo del pueblo coreano que lucha contra la agresión del imperialismo de los Estados Unidos," *Boletín de Corea* (Havana), no. 7 (December 1962).

⁷⁶ "Memorandum of a Conversation with the USSR Ambassador, c. V. P. Moskovskiy" (January 7, 1964), Wilson Center Digital Archive: digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116747; "Relief Goods to Cuba," KCNA, February 5, 1964, Readex collection, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, 1941–1996*.

⁷⁷ "Metallurgy experts to Cuba," Radio Havana, December 5, 1963, Readex collection, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, 1941–1996*.

colonial system,”⁷⁸ and the opening salvo in the coming Latin American revolution. It relished the humiliation the United States had suffered in the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961, and what the event supposedly proved: that Washington’s power was in sharp decline while the revolutionary Third World was in ascendant. It was a sentiment echoed by Cuban leader Vilma Espin when she proclaimed in Moscow in 1965: “If little Cuba, located only ninety miles from North American imperialism, is able to carry out its revolution, then all peoples everywhere can do so.”⁷⁹

The close bond emerging between North Korea and Cuba in the early 1960s can in part be explained by the similar backgrounds of both groups of leaders: guerrillas from the global South, stronger in their anti-imperialism and their patriotism than in their commitment to Marxist–Leninist orthodoxy. Both Cuba and North Korea were in different stages of building socialism from a predominantly agrarian, highly dependent economic foundation, and conceptualized their respective revolutionary projects as part of a broader historical narrative of resistance to foreign domination. Cuba faced constant aggression from the US government and terrorist groups based in Miami, including the CIA’s now infamous schemes to assassinate Fidel. North Koreans lived with 50,000 US troops stationed in the southern half of the peninsula, and, since 1958, an arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons aimed at Pyongyang. The capacity of Washington to project its power around the world was the primary obstacle to the central foreign policy goals of both governments: for the Cubans, the spread of revolution in Latin America; for the North Koreans, the reunification of the peninsula. As a result, both parties shared fundamental reservations about the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence and held high hopes for how revolution throughout the global South could alter the global balance of forces against US imperialism. These commonalities were frequently commented upon by both parties themselves. As Cuban President Osvaldo Dorticós told a visiting North Korean delegation in November 1967:

Korea, like Cuba, is waging a tenacious struggle, hard, difficult, but full of faith in the construction of a future; Korea, like Cuba, develops this work in constant battle with imperialism, especially with US imperialism; Korea, like

⁷⁸ Kim Tökhyön, “Panje panmi t’ujaeng üi kich’irül nop’i tülgo sahojuüü üi hwihwangan kirül ttara him ch’age naaganün Kkuba” [Cuba is advancing vigorously along the glorious path of socialism, holding high the banner of the anti-imperialist, anti-US struggle], *Külloja*, no. 7 (July 1, 1970), 59.

⁷⁹ *The Tricontinental Conference of Africa, Asian and Latin American Peoples; a staff study, 89th Congress, 2nd session, Senate* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 5.

Cuba, suffers imperialist infiltration and sabotage; Korea, like Cuba, on various occasions is the object of imperialist provocations; Korea, like Cuba, is always potentially threatened by imperialist aggression. But what is more important: Korea, like Cuba, facing these aggressions and these threats, is firm, determined to remain within the revolutionary and communist spirit, to deepen the revolutionary content of all its work, to develop the ideological, economic and military power of the country to face that threat; Korea, like Cuba, is prepared to fight with arms in hands for the defence of its integrity and its independence; Korea, like Cuba, is prepared to combat in any circumstances against imperialism for the defence of its land, its nation, and its principles. These are essential identities that unite us.⁸⁰

On the other hand, as junior members of the socialist camp, the two governments shared another dilemma: they relied on the economic and military support of the larger socialist countries, and that dependency carried with it a persistent threat to their political sovereignty. These shared perspectives and interests would facilitate a new alignment between North Korea, Cuba, and North Vietnam by the mid-1960s.

1.5 NORTH KOREA, CUBA, AND THE SINO-SOVIET SPLIT

By the early 1960s, long-simmering tensions between the Communist Party of China (CPC) led by Mao Zedong and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) under Nikita Khrushchev had erupted into open hostility. While the factors involved in the Sino-Soviet split were complex and still the subject of debate among historians,⁸¹ central was disagreement over the correct policy towards the United States and the tide of anti-colonial revolt occurring throughout the global South. At the twentieth congress of the CPSU in February 1956, Khrushchev announced the doctrine of peaceful coexistence. Recognizing the dangers of thermonuclear war, he argued that the socialist and capitalist camps could peacefully coexist and that the eventual triumph of socialism internationally was ensured by its inherent superiority as a socio-economic system. While Moscow was unequivocal in its opposition to colonialism, and supported armed struggle in certain circumstances, it favoured peaceful transitions that avoided instability and the escalation of international tensions. It believed that conditions in the global South generally called

⁸⁰ *Visita a Cuba de la delegación Coreana* (Habana: Ediciones Políticos, 1968), 42.

⁸¹ On the origins of the Sino-Soviet Split, see Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Mingjiang Li, *Mao's China and the Sino-Soviet Split* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

not for armed insurrection, but rather “development along the road of social progress and genuine national independence,” in which communists participate in united fronts with “all patriotic, progressive and democratic forces.”⁸² In this context, the communist parties of Latin America were advised to pursue change through legal means and participate in national elections as part of progressive coalitions, given the necessary conditions existed.

The CPC under Mao rejected the “revisionist” position of peaceful coexistence as opportunistic and a betrayal of the Marxist–Leninist principle of proletarian internationalism. It was the Chinese Revolution’s legacy of “people’s war” that showed the way forward for the global South, and armed national liberation struggles demanded the support of the socialist camp without fear of how Washington might react. “The storm of the people’s revolution in Asia, Africa and Latin America requires every political force in the world to take a stand” Mao declared in October 1963. “Only when imperialism is eliminated can peace prevail.”⁸³ The CPC leadership pointed towards several episodes that allegedly proved Moscow had forsaken those peoples struggling against colonialism and imperialism: its cautious policy in Vietnam, its initial support for the 1960 UN peacekeeping mission in the Congo, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Denouncing the CPSU as unworthy of the leadership of the international communist movement, the CPC worked to build an alternate block of parties supportive of its “anti-revisionist” line.

Initially, the North Korean leadership carefully guarded its neutrality in the Sino-Soviet split. By the fall of 1962, however, a number of developments had pushed it to come out in strong support of the Chinese position. In May 1961, a military coup in Seoul brought the ardent anti-communist Park Chung Hee to power, drastically increasing North Korean fears of an imminent military conflict.⁸⁴ The Cuban Missile Crisis

⁸² Leonid Brezhnev, “Report of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the 23rd Congress of the CPSU,” in *23rd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Moscow: Novosti Press Publishing House, 1966), 35.

⁸³ Mao Zedong, “US Imperialism Is a Paper Tiger,” July 14, 1956, Marxist Internet Archive: www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_52.htm.

⁸⁴ Lee Mi-Kyung, “Kukche hwan’gyōngūi Puk’an ūi chajunosŏn chōngnip 1960 nŏnda sigirŭl chungsimŭro” [The Changing International Environment and North Korea’s Establishment of the Independent Diplomacy in the 1960s], *Kukche chōngchi nonchōng* [The Korean Journal of International Studies] 43, no. 2 (June 2003), 280–1; Kim Bomi, “Ter’angr’ŭ sidae ūi naenggak chidae: Puk’an oegyojōngch’aek ūi inyōmgwa han’gye (1966–1976)” [Resisting Detente: Ideology and Limitations of North Korean Foreign Policy, 1966–1976], *Hyōndaebuk’anyōn’gu* [Review of North Korean Studies] 18, no. 2 (August 2015), 50.

of October 1962 was interpreted by the North Korean leadership as evidence it could not rely on Soviet protection in the event of US aggression.⁸⁵ Pyongyang responded negatively to Soviet pressure to side with it in its dispute with Beijing, such as when Moscow ignored a North Korean plea for military aid in December 1962.⁸⁶ A Hungarian diplomat's account of Soviet Premier Alexi Kosygin's December 1965 visit to Pyongyang relates that "Korean leaders were distrustful of the CPSU and the Soviet government." Kim Il Sung reportedly told Kosygin "the Soviet Union had betrayed Cuba at the time of the Caribbean crisis, and later, it also betrayed the Vietnamese," and that furthermore it "did not support the national liberation struggle of the Asian and African peoples."⁸⁷

Kim's address to the Third Supreme People's Assembly in March 1962 made clear how his international perspective had evolved. In the speech, Kim explicitly linked his rejection of peaceful coexistence to Korea's own history of anti-colonial struggle, and the continued division of the peninsula. "How can we quit the struggle against imperialism when half of the country and two-thirds of the population still remain under imperialist oppression?" Kim asked. "How can we go along with giving the US imperialists a charming image when every day they spill our people's blood and humiliate our brothers and sisters?" If North Korea accepted the logic of peaceful coexistence, Kim argued, this would be tantamount to "abandoning South Korea to US imperialist plunder forever and leaving the south Korean workers and peasants to endure the exploitation and oppression of the national traitors."⁸⁸

The Soviet Union had every right to pursue peaceful relations with the United States, Kim argued. What was unacceptable, was to try to restrain the revolutionary impulse elsewhere, ostracizing those communists who did not conform to their revisionist line, and interfering in the internal affairs of fraternal countries.⁸⁹ Kim affirmed the WPK's commitment to do "everything in our power" to support national liberation struggles

⁸⁵ Kim, "Tet'angt'ü sidae üi naenggak chidae," 50.

⁸⁶ Kim, "Puk'an üi chajuogeyonosön ch'aet'aegae," 267–8; Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia, *A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim Il-Sung, and Sino-North Korean Relations, 1949–1976*, revised edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 149–50.

⁸⁷ "Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry," January 8, 1965, Wilson Center Digital Archive: digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116488.

⁸⁸ "Tang chojik saöp kwa sasang saöp ül kaesön kanghai halte taehayö," [On Improving and Strengthening the Organizational and Ideological Work of the Party], March 8, 1962, in Kim Il Sung *Chönjip*, vol. 29 (Pyongyang: WPK Publishing House, 2000), 131–2.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

throughout the global South.⁹⁰ While North Korea's anti-revisionist stand was frequently interpreted by outsiders as a sign of loyalty to China, it was adamant that its position remained an independent one. A CIA intelligence report in 1967 assessed that the WPK, along with the communist parties of Vietnam, Indonesia, and Japan, "were not obedient retainers of the Chinese but rather their voluntary allies, whose anti-Khrushchev position had derived in large part from what they regarded as his soft line towards the United States."⁹¹

As Cuban leaders were confronted with the Sino-Soviet split, it was evident the Chinese line was more compatible with their perspective on the United States, and their intention to aid revolutionary movements throughout Latin America. So obvious was this affinity that many observers during the early 1960s speculated that Cuba was drifting towards Beijing's side. Many of the new Latin American guerrilla groups saw the Cuban and Chinese revolutions as complimentary models: both spoke to the tasks of revolutionary movements in the global South and emphasized the role of the peasantry and the primacy of guerrilla warfare. But while much of the Cuban leadership viewed Beijing favourably, they could not afford to jeopardize Soviet assistance. The Cuban response was to retain its neutrality as long as possible, hopeful that the two socialist powers would eventually reconcile.

In contrast to Cuban leaders' initially positive assessment of Chinese policy, the Missile Crisis of October 1962 severely damaged Cuba–Soviet relations. The Cuban People's Militia even invented a new chant: ("Nikita mariquita, lo que se da no se quita, pim pam fuera, abajo Caimanera")⁹² ("Nikita you little sissy – that which is given is not taken back – *pim pam* out – down with *Caimanera*").⁹³ The Cuban press reprinted Chinese editorials chastising Moscow's actions and making comparisons to the 1938 Munich Agreement, as did North Korea.⁹⁴ While ultimately the Cuban leadership still depended on Moscow's support, the somewhat romantic view of the Soviet Union many Cuban leaders demonstrated in the 1959–1962 period was forever tarnished. Many veterans of the pro-Soviet PSP in the government were demoted and replaced with Fidel's

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 132–3.

⁹¹ "The Sino-Soviet Struggle in the World Communist Movement Since Khrushchev's Fall," part 1, CIA Intelligence report, ESAU XXXIV, September 1967, 1, Internet Archive: archive.org/details/ESAU-CIA/page/n11.

⁹² K. S. Karol, *Guerrillas in Power* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1970), 272.

⁹³ Caimanera is the Cuban name for the US military base in Guantanamo Bay.

⁹⁴ Karol, *Guerrillas in Power*, 277.

comrades from the Sierra Maestra. Moreover, the Cuban leadership was increasingly open about its intent to aid armed revolutionary movements throughout the region, as well as its disagreements with Soviet policy and the Latin American communist parties.⁹⁵ Cuban leaders' frustration with the Soviet bloc were reciprocated: following the missile crisis, the Hungarian ambassador to Cuba reported "It has turned out that within the layer of Cuban leaders the number and, most of all, the influence of those who may be really called Marxists and communists is smaller than we believed. We can feel the impact of various nationalist or petit-bourgeois opinions and of the practical standpoints and measures originating from them."⁹⁶ Chief among these standpoints was "instead of the economic building work, they still pay the most attention to 'world revolution,' that is, as the Cubans put it, to the Latin American revolution..."⁹⁷ It was precisely this priority given to "world revolution" that would bond the Cuban and North Korean leaderships during the 1960s.

Cuban and North Korean frustration with Soviet policy explains why many observers at the time reasoned both governments had or would eventually drift into China's orbit. Ironically, events took quite a different turn. Both Cuba and North Korea experienced a significant deterioration of relations with China beginning in late 1964. The coinciding timelines reflected the degree to which their foreign policy interests had become intertwined. In October 1964, Leonid Brezhnev succeeded Khrushchev as General Secretary of the CPSU. The new administration that emerged took important steps towards improving relations with Cuba and the Asian communist parties that had been alienated by its predecessor. These policies included a greater commitment to supporting Vietnam, new promises of economic and military aid to Cuba and North Korea, and an altered tone signalling it would be more respectful of the autonomy of fraternal parties. Moreover, a November 1964 meeting in Havana achieved a *modus vivendi* between the Cuban government and the pro-Soviet Latin American communist parties, even if below the surface differences remained. Encouraged by these developments, Cuba initiated new efforts to bridge the Sino-Soviet rift. In December 1964, a delegation of

⁹⁵ "The Sino-Soviet Struggle in Cuba and the Latin American Communist Movement," CIA staff study, ESAU XXIII-63, November 1963, xii, Internet Archive: archive.org/details/ESAU-CIA/page/n1.

⁹⁶ "Hungarian Embassy in Havana (Beck), Report on 'Relations between Cuba and the Socialist Countries Since the [Cuban Missile] Crisis'," January 28, 1963, Wilson Center Digital Archive: digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116845.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

representatives of Latin American communist parties headed by senior Cuban official Carlos Rafael Rodríguez (1913–1997) visited the Soviet Union and China with the aim of mediating an end to the feud. In Moscow, Soviet officials assured the delegates they were prepared to “forget the past” and “sit down at the table for discussions without conditions.”⁹⁸ By contrast, the Venezuelan delegate Eduardo Mancera described their three days in Beijing as “traumatizing.”⁹⁹ Mao was so aggressive and sarcastic that Mancera was convinced the Chairman had reached advanced stages of senility. Mao ridiculed Fidel in absentia and was incensed over Cuban requests that the Chinese cease anti-Soviet propaganda activities on the island. He reminded his guests that the countries of Latin America were only 400 or 500 years old, compared to the 5,000-year-old civilization of China. He insulted the Uruguayan delegate by suggesting few people could locate his country on a map.¹⁰⁰ The meeting confirmed that the recent improvement in Soviet–Cuba relations, and Cuban efforts to restrict Chinese propaganda activities on their island in particular, had convinced Mao that Havana was fully committed to Moscow.

Meanwhile, Cuban leaders were becoming increasingly frustrated with China’s efforts to play a leadership role in the Latin American Left. Beijing ignored Havana’s authority in this regard and fostered its own network of communist organizations that followed the Chinese line. When invited to Beijing in March 1965, delegates of these groups were informed by Liu Shaoqi, Chairman of the PRC, that the Cuban leadership had chosen revisionism and was now “an enemy of revolutionary struggle in Latin America.”¹⁰¹

These events paralleled and influenced a similar deterioration of Sino–DPRK relations.¹⁰² The North Korean leadership had grown particularly critical of the manner in which Beijing pursued its crusade against Soviet revisionism at the expense of the anti-imperialist struggle, especially as the Vietnam War escalated. North Korean leaders also resented Mao’s

⁹⁸ Eduardo Gallegos Mancera quoted in Agustín Blanco Muñoz, *¡Comunista por siempre!: habla Eduardo Gallegos Mancera* (Caracas: Catedra Pio Tamayo, 2009), 529–32.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Liu Shaoqi, quoted in *The Sino-Soviet Dispute within the Communist Movement in Latin America*, CIA Intelligence Report, ESAU XXVIII, June 15, 1967, 23, fn, FOIA Electronic Reading Room: www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/esau-32.pdf.15.

¹⁰² Kim Donggil, “Kaehyök kaebang ijön naengjön sigi (1949–1980), Chungguk ūi Hanbando chōngch’aek yōn’gu,” [The PRC Policy towards the Korean Peninsula during the Cold War period, 1949–1980], *Yōksahakpo* [The Korean Historical Review] 245 (March 2020), 296–7.

increasingly belligerent attitude towards their Cuban allies, and his presumption of a leadership role in Latin America. By late 1964, the Soviets could perceive a growing dissonance, surmising that the WPK was reacting negatively to the “great Han nationalism and political adventurism of the Chinese leaders” and that now “the idea of the independence of WPK policy began to again be stressed with special force.”¹⁰³ As a comparison, a CIA report from the same time reaching virtually identical conclusions blamed the cooling of Sino–DPRK relations on the “rigid dogmatism and political ineptitude” of the CPC: “The concept of a Sino-centric world, at least insofar as truth and right are concerned, is as strong in Peking today as it was under the emperors centuries ago.”¹⁰⁴

In August 1964, the first US aerial bombing of Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), commenced in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, followed by the launch of a sustained bombing campaign and the deployment of ground troops the following March. The DRV leadership welcomed a substantial increase in Soviet military aid under Brezhnev, especially as they saw the need to switch from purely guerrilla tactics to more conventional warfare, requiring military resources China could not provide.¹⁰⁵ Beijing, meanwhile, in the zealotry of its anti-revisionist campaign, lambasted North Vietnamese leaders for their apparent shift in loyalties, refused to participate in any multilateral effort to support Vietnam that involved Moscow, and blocked Soviet military aid shipments that needed to pass through Chinese territory.¹⁰⁶ In such circumstances, the imagined paradigm of China’s internationalism versus Soviet compromise lost much of its power. As the North Korean leadership had come to view Cuba as leading the Latin American revolution, and Vietnam as the crucial frontline of the anti-imperialist struggle,¹⁰⁷ Beijing’s behaviour towards its allies was unacceptable – a view made explicit in

¹⁰³ “Excerpts from the Report of the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang, ‘Some New Aspects of Korean-Chinese Relations in the First Half of 1965’,” June 4, 1965, Wilson Center Digital Archive: digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110503.

¹⁰⁴ *China’s Growing Isolation in the Communist Movement*, CIA Current Intelligence Weekly Special Report, August 5, 1966, 1, CREST database, US National Archives.

¹⁰⁵ Nicholas Khoo, *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*; A 7 May 1967 DVO Memo about Intergovernmental Relations between the DPRK and Romania, the DRV, and Cuba, May 7, 1967, Wilson Center Digital Archive: digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116701.

¹⁰⁷ Trần Quang Minh and Nguyễn Thị Thắm, “Pet’ünam-Puk’an kwan’gye: 65 nǎn’gan koch’algwa chǒnmang” [Vietnam–North Korea Relations: some remarks on the last 65 years and future prospects] *Tongayǒn’gu* [East Asian Studies] 35, no. 2 (2016), 357–9.

a December 1964 *Rodong sinmun* editorial criticizing Chinese “dogmatism.”¹⁰⁸ The Soviets assessed in December 1966, “As events progressed in Vietnam the WPK leadership became increasingly convinced that the Chinese ruling group was hiding behind high-sounding phrases about the battle against imperialism but is in fact being obstructive in this battle,” and that now, “the Korean leaders condemn the Chinese leaders for their great power chauvinism, dogmatism, and ‘left’ opportunism.”¹⁰⁹

The parallel with which Cuban and North Korean attitudes towards the Soviet Union and China shifted between the Cuban Missile Crisis and the fall of Khrushchev demonstrates how close their perspectives had become intertwined. While the North Koreans and Cubans welcomed the change in Soviet policy, both maintained a principled disagreement with the policy of peaceful coexistence, and their scepticism of Moscow’s commitment to revolutionary struggle in the global South. Emerging between the Soviet and Chinese poles was a third, independent bloc led by North Korea, Cuba, and North Vietnam, that was increasingly bold in its willingness to speak on behalf of what had become known as the Third World, and to criticize the two major socialist powers.

1.6 THE ATTACK ON THE CUBAN AMBASSADOR IN PYONGYANG

While DPRK–Cuba friendship was strengthening during 1965, one incident threatened to derail it. The WPK suffered a major embarrassment on March 28 of that year, when the Cuban ambassador to North Korea, Lázaro Vigoa Aranguren, his wife, and a group of visiting Cuban doctors were attacked by a mob in the streets of Pyongyang. The incident was sparked when the Cubans, who had been touring the city by car, stopped to photograph a building partially destroyed in the war. A large mob surrounded the car, pounding it with their fists and hurling insults, “especially against the Cuban ambassador as a black man,” an East German report on the incident noted, while a nearby group of militiamen stood idle.¹¹⁰ The mob was eventually dispersed by an armed security

¹⁰⁸ *Rodong Sinmun* [Workers’ Daily], December 3, 1964.

¹⁰⁹ “First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in North Korean Reports on Sino-Korean Relations in 1966,” (December 2, 1966), Wilson Center Digital Archive: digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114591.

¹¹⁰ “Information about a Grave Incident with the Cuban Ambassador on 25 March 1965 in Pyongyang” (April 21, 1965), Wilson Center Digital Archive: digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111818.

service unit, which shocked the Cubans with their heavy-handedness as they “proceeded to exercise extraordinary brutality against the crowd, including the children.”¹¹¹

A lengthy report prepared by the East German ambassador reveals how seriously the incident was taken. A series of high-profile meetings between the Cuban ambassador and North Korean officials followed, including one with Kim Il Sung, who vowed to punish all those involved. At one such meeting, Kim’s deputy Ri Hyosŏn (purged in May 1967) reportedly told the Cuban ambassador that “the level of training of the masses is extremely low. They cannot differentiate between friends and foes. They completely misinterpret our call for revolutionary vigilance.” Reading the report, one is unclear what the Cubans and East Germans found more distressing: the inexplicable behaviour of the mob, or the viciousness of the security officers who beat children with rifle butts. “Witnessing the brutality the security services used against adults and children brought the wife of the Cuban ambassador to the brink of a nervous breakdown,”¹¹² the report ended.

The incident reminds us that behind the public displays of fraternal unity, conflicts and misgivings of varying proportions inevitably surfaced in the relations between the two countries. Perhaps unsurprising given the terrifying ordeal described above, Vigoa harboured critical views of his North Korean hosts, and in particular, questioned the quality of the industrial goods they offered Cuba. If some Cubans were disappointed with the quality of North Korean products, this was not unusual: Cubans were accustomed to US technology and consumer goods, and often found the alternatives offered by socialist countries wanting. As Chapter 5 examines, some Latin Americans living in Pyongyang in the 1960s, including Cubans, were turned off by the extravagant personality cult constructed around Kim Il Sung, and came to question whether the North Korean model of socialism was really worthy of admiration. Eduardo Murillo Ugarte, a Chilean communist who lived in Pyongyang from 1960 to 1967, recalls how a minor scandal once arose when a Cuban man and a local North Korean woman attempted to get married. According to Murillo, the union was permitted “only after six months of talks between representatives of the Cuban Embassy in Pyongyang and the North Korean authorities.”¹¹³ This itself may have reflected the exceptionally

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Eduardo Murillo Ugarte, personal communication with the author, April 4, 2018.

strong state of Cuban-DPRK relations, as Murillo's testimony joins many others in asserting that romantic relationships between North Koreans and foreigners were strictly forbidden, albeit unofficially.

As disconcerting as such incidents must have been to Cuban leaders, it was not sufficient to slow the momentum of their growing partnership with North Korea. During the latter half of the 1960s, the two leaderships continued to strengthen a bond based on the recognition of the threat posed by US military interventionism, as well as a mutual interest in preserving their autonomy from the two major socialist powers. The North Korean and Cuban communist parties took the lead in an emerging, international Third Worldist political tendency that rivalled Moscow and Beijing for influence within the international Left. Tricontinentalism was based on the analysis that the storm centre of world revolution had shifted decisively to the global South, and that the defeat of US imperialism was the central task of the current historical juncture. Ignoring both Soviet calls for "peaceful coexistence" and China's sectarian struggle against "revisionism," Tricontinentalism sought to build a united front of militant left-wing and anti-colonial forces throughout the global South willing to meet this historical task.