

Kim Il-sung was born Kim Song-ju in Mangyondae, near Pyongyang, the present-day capital of North Korea, on April 15, 1912. His parents took the family to Manchuria in the 1920s to flee the Japanese occupation of Korea. During the 1930s, Kim, who mastered Chinese, would become a Korean freedom fighter, working against the Japanese and taking the name Il-sung in honor of a famed guerilla fighter. Kim eventually relocated to the Soviet Union for special training, where he joined the country's Communist Party. Kim remained in the Soviet Union from 1940 until the end of World War II, during which time he helmed a unit within the Soviet army. Kim and his first wife, Kim Jong Suk, had their son, Kim Jong Il, during this period as well.

The Korean War

After an absence of two decades, Kim returned to Korea in 1945, with the country divided as the Soviets came to power in the North while the southern half of the country became allied with the United States. Kim set up shop as chairman of the People's Committee of North Korea, the regional communist group later to be known as the Korean Workers Party. In 1948, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was founded, with Kim as its premier.

In the summer of 1950—after strategizing and convincing his initially skeptical allies Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-tung of his plan—Kim led an invasion into the south looking to unify the country under northern control, thereby initiating the Korean War. American and additional United Nations military forces got involved in the conflict, with casualties from all sides, including civilian deaths, eventually reaching 1 million. The war ceased at a stalemate with a signed armistice in July 1953.

Country's 'Great Leader'

As head of state, Kim continued to have an agitative relationship with South Korea, with North Korea becoming known as a highly controlled, oppressive country whose people were allowed no contact with the West. Under a propaganda-based social fabric, Kim aimed to foster the concept of economic self-reliance and came to be known as "Great Leader." He was elected president of the country in late 1972, taking on a domestic policy that focused on militarization and industrialization. There were also hints of more peaceful relations with South Korea in the form of the Red Cross Talks.

North Korea's fortunes declined during the '70s as South Korea prospered, and foreign aid from the Soviet Union ceased when the Cold War came to a close. With concerns about North Korea's nuclear program mounting, former U.S. president Jimmy Carter met with Kim in 1994 to talk about the possibility of aid from the West in exchange for a halt in the country's weapons program. Kim had also made plans for a historical meeting with South Korean leader Kim Young-Sam. Kim died in Pyongyang on July 8, 1994, allegedly from a heart condition, before the summit could take place.

Kim Il-sung's son, Jong Il, took over leadership of the country until his death in 2011. Jong Il was then succeeded by his own son, Kim Jong-un.

Early Life of Kim Jong Il

Born February 16, 1941, though official accounts place birth a year later. Some mystery surrounds when and where Kim Jong Il was born. During World War II, his father commanded the 1st Battalion of the Soviet 88th Brigade, composed of Chinese and Korean exiles battling the Japanese Army. Kim Jong Il's mother was Kim Jong Suk, his father's first wife. Official accounts indicate that Kim Jong Il comes from a family of nationalists who actively resisted imperialism from the Japanese in the early 20th century.

His official government biography claims Kim Jong Il completed his general education between September 1950 and August 1960 in Pyongyang, the current capital city of North Korea. But scholars point out that the first few years of this period were during the Korean War and contend his early education took place in the People's Republic of China, where it was safer to live. Official accounts claim that throughout his schooling, Kim was involved in politics.

Rise to Power

Kim Jong Il joined the Workers' Party, the official ruling party of North Korea, in July 1961. Most political experts believe the party follows the traditions of Stalinist politics even though North Korea began distancing itself from Soviet domination in 1956. The Workers' Party claims to have its own ideology, steeped in the philosophy of Juche. However, in the late 1960s, the party instituted a policy of "burning loyalty" to the "Great Leader" (Kim Il Sung). This practice of personality cult is reminiscent of Stalinist Russia but was taken to new heights with Kim Il Sung and would continue with Kim Jong Il.

Soon after his 1964 graduation from the university, Kim Jong Il began his rise through the ranks of the Korean Workers' Party. The 1960s were a time of high tension between many Communist countries. China and the Soviet Union were clashing over ideological differences that resulted in several border skirmishes, Soviet satellite nations in Eastern Europe were simmering with dissent, and North Korea was pulling away from both Soviet and Chinese influence. Within North Korea, internal forces were attempting to revise the party's revolutionary message. Kim Jong Il was appointed to the Workers' Party Central Committee to lead the offensive against the revisionists and ensure the party did not deviate from the ideological line set by his father. He also led efforts to expose dissidents and deviant policies to ensure strict enforcement of the party's ideological system. In addition, he took on major military reform to strengthen the party's control of the military and expelled disloyal officers.

Kim Jong Il oversaw the Propaganda and Agitation department, the government agency responsible for media control and censorship. Kim gave firm instructions that the party's monolithic ideological message be communicated constantly by writers, artists, and officials in the media. According to official accounts, he revolutionized Korean fine arts by encouraging the production of new works in new media. This included the art of film and cinema. Mixing history, political ideology, and movie-making, Kim encouraged the production of several epic films, which glorified works written by his father. His official biography claims that Kim Jong Il has composed six operas and enjoys staging elaborate musicals. Kim is reported to be an avid film buff who owns more than 20,000 movies, including the entire series of James Bond films, for his personal enjoyment.

Kim Il Sung began preparing his son to lead North Korea in the early 1970s. Between 1971 and 1980, Kim Jong Il was appointed to increasingly important positions in the Korean Workers' Party. During this time, he instituted policies to bring party officials closer to the people by forcing bureaucrats to work among subordinates for one month a year. He launched the Three-Revolution Team Movement, in which teams of political, technical, and scientific technicians traveled around the country to provide training. He was also involved in economic planning to develop certain sectors of the economy.

By the 1980s, preparations were being made for Kim to succeed his father as the leader of North Korea. At this time, the government began building a personality cult around Kim Jong Il patterned after that of his father. Just as Kim Il Sung was known as the "Great Leader," Kim Jong Il was hailed in the North Korean media as the "fearless leader" and "the great successor to the revolutionary cause." His portraits appeared in public buildings along with his father's. He

also initiated a series of drop-in inspections of businesses, factories, and government offices. At the Sixth Party Congress in 1980, Kim Jong Il was given senior posts in the Politburo (the policy committee of the Korean Workers' Party), the Military Commission, and the Secretariat (the executive department charged with carrying out policy). Thus, Kim was positioned to control all aspects of the government.

The one area of leadership in which Kim Jong Il might have had a perceived weakness was the military. The army was the foundation of power in North Korea, and Kim had no military service experience. With the assistance of allies in the military, Kim was able to gain acceptance by the army officials as the next leader of North Korea. By 1991, he was designated as the supreme commander of the Korean People's Army, thus giving him the tool he needed to maintain complete control of the government once he took power.

Following the death of Kim Il Sung in July 1994, Kim Jong Il took total control of the country. This transition of power from father to son had never been seen before in a communist regime. In deference to his father, the office of president was abolished, and Kim Jong Il took the titles of general secretary of the Workers' Party and chairman of the National Defense Commission, which was declared the highest office of the state.

Foreign Aid and Nuclear Testing

It is important to understand that much of Kim Jong Il's persona is based on a cult of personality, meaning that legend and official North Korean government accounts describe his life, character, and actions in ways that promote and legitimize his leadership. Examples include his family's nationalist revolutionary roots and claims that his birth was foretold by a swallow, the appearance of a double rainbow over Mount Paekdu, and a new star in the heavens. He is known to personally manage the country's affairs and sets operational guidelines for individual industries. He is said to be arrogant and self-centered in policy decisions, openly rejecting criticism or opinions that differ from his. He is suspicious of nearly all of those who surround him and volatile in his emotions. There are many stories of his eccentricities, his playboy lifestyle, the lifts in his shoes and pompadour hairstyle that make him appear taller, and his fear of flying. Some stories can be verified while others are most likely exaggerated, possibly circulated by foreign operatives from hostile countries.

In the 1990s, North Korea went through a series of devastating and debilitating economic episodes. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, North Korea lost its main trading partner. Strained relations with China following China's normalization with South Korea in 1992 further limited North Korea's trade options. Record-breaking floods in 1995 and 1996 followed by drought in 1997 crippled North Korea's food production. With only 18 percent of its land suitable for farming in the best of times, North Korea began experiencing a devastating famine. Worried about his position in power, Kim Jong Il instituted the Military First policy, which prioritized national resources to the military. Thus, the military would be pacified and remain in his control. Kim could defend himself from threats domestic and foreign, while economic conditions worsened. The policy did produce some economic growth and along with some socialist-type market practices—characterized as a "flirtation with capitalism"—North Korea has been able to remain operational despite being heavily dependent on foreign aid for food. In 1994, the Clinton administration and North Korea agreed to a framework designed to freeze and eventually dismantle North Korea's nuclear weapons program. In exchange, the United States would provide assistance in producing two power-generating nuclear reactors and supplying fuel oil and other economic aid. In 2000, the presidents of North Korea and South Korea met for diplomatic talks and agreed to promote reconciliation and economic cooperation between the two countries. The agreement allowed families from both countries to reunite and signaled a move toward increased trade and investment. For a time, it appeared that North Korea was reentering the international community.

Then in 2002, U.S. intelligence agencies suspected North Korea was enriching uranium or building the facilities to do so, presumably for making nuclear weapons. In his 2002 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush identified North Korea as one of the countries in the "axis of evil" (along with Iraq and Iran). The Bush administration soon revoked the 1994 treaty designed to eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Finally, in 2003, Kim Jong Il's

government admitted to having produced nuclear weapons for security purposes, citing tensions with President Bush. Late in 2003, the Central Intelligence Agency issued a report that North Korea possessed one and possibly two nuclear bombs. The Chinese government stepped in to try to mediate a settlement, but President Bush refused to meet with Kim Jong Il one-on-one and instead insisted on multilateral negotiations. China was able to gather Russia, Japan, South Korea, and the United States for negotiations with North Korea. Talks were held in 2003, 2004, and twice in 2005. All through the meetings, the Bush administration demanded North Korea eliminate its nuclear weapons program. It adamantly maintained any normalcy of relations between North Korea and the United States would come about only if North Korea changed its human rights policies, eliminated all chemical and biological weapons programs, and ended missile technology proliferation. North Korea continually rejected the proposal. In 2006, North Korea's Central News Agency announced North Korea had successfully conducted an underground nuclear bomb test.

Failing Health

There have been many reports and claims regarding Kim Jong Il's health and physical condition. In August 2008, a Japanese publication claimed Kim had died in 2003 and had been replaced with a stand-in for public appearances. It was also noted that Kim hadn't made a public appearance for the Olympic torch ceremony in Pyongyang in April 2008. After Kim failed to show up for a military parade celebrating North Korea's 60th anniversary, U.S. intelligence agencies believed Kim to be gravely ill after possibly suffering a stroke. During the fall of 2008, numerous news sources gave conflicting reports on his condition. The North Korean news agency reported Kim participated in national elections in March 2009 and was unanimously elected to a seat in the Supreme People's Assembly, the North Korean parliament. The assembly will vote later to confirm him as chairman of the National Defense Commission. In the report, it was said Kim cast his ballot at the Kim Il Sung University and later toured the facility and talked to a small group of people.

Kim's health was watched closely by other countries because of his volatile nature, the country's possession of nuclear weapons, and its precarious economic condition.

Kim Jong-un took on the mantle of North Korea's supreme leadership with little political or military experience behind him. Kim Jong-Il, North Korea's "Dear Leader", was in the process of grooming Kim Jong-un as his successor when he died on 17 December 2011.

Immediately after his father's death, the younger Kim was hailed as "the great successor". He was named head of the party, state and army after his father's death.

Since coming to power Mr. Kim's most high-profile act has been to purge and execute his uncle, Chang Song-thaek, who state media said had been plotting a coup.

In September 2014, he made no public appearances for a month, prompting speculation of illness and even a possible change of power. He later re-appeared in photographs released by state media walking with a stick.

'Morning Star King'

Little is still known about the elusive young man who is the youngest son of Kim Jong-Il and his late third wife Ko Yong-hui.

Born in 1983 or early 1984, he was initially not thought to be in the frame to take up his father's mantle.

Analysts focused their attention on his half-brother Kim Jong-nam and older full brother Kim Jong-chol.

However Kim Jong-nam's deportation from Japan in May 2001 and middle brother Kim Jong-chol's apparent "unmanliness" improved his chances.

Analysts saw him as the next leader after he was awarded a series of high-profile political posts.

Swiss-educated like his brothers, Kim Jong-un avoided Western influences, returning home when not in school and dining out with the North Korean ambassador.

After his return to Pyongyang, he is known to have attended the Kim Il-sung Military University.

His mother was thought to be Kim Jong-Il's favorite wife, and she clearly doted on her son, reportedly calling him the "Morning Star King". He is also said to be his father's favorite.

Some reports speculated that he had been anointed successor partly because of his resemblance to North Korea's founder Kim Il-sung.

A few North Korea watchers went so far as to say that he may have had plastic surgery to enhance the resemblance, in a country where the **deification** of the Kim family is at the heart of its grip on power.

Mr. Kim made his first public speech as North Korea marked the 100th anniversary of the birthday of Kim Il-sung on 15 April 2012, praising the "**military first**" doctrine and vowing the time his nation could be threatened was "forever over".

"Superiority in military technology is no longer monopolized by imperialists," he said, adding: "We have to make every effort to reinforce the people's armed forces."

International reaction

In 2012, Mr. Kim was appointed marshal - the highest military rank - following a high-level military reshuffle in which army chief Ri Yong-ho was removed.

Since then some of North Korea's actions have elicited condemnation from the international community.

A few months into his leadership, in April 2012, North Korea launched a rocket, which it said would put a satellite into orbit. The unsuccessful launch was seen by many as a banned test of long-range missile technology. This attempt was followed by a successful launch of a satellite into space, using a three-stage rocket, in December 2012. South Korea, Japan and the US said the launch was a disguised missile test, and the UN Security Council unanimously approved a resolution condemning the launch and tightening sanctions.

In February 2013, North Korea carried out a third nuclear test, said to be twice as big as the 2009 test. This resulted in fresh sanctions from the UN Security Council.

In April 2013, heightened tension in the peninsula saw North Korea withdraw workers from the Kaesong industrial zone, jointly run with South Korea and the last symbol of inter-Korean co-operation. The zone was reopened in September after negotiations.

The purge of his uncle in late 2013 caused international concern. Mr Chang was vice-chairman of the powerful National Defense Commission who sat at the heart of the country's leadership, and was seen as a major figure in Mr. Kim's administration.

In his first public reference to the execution in a message broadcast on 1 January 2014, Mr. Kim spoke of the "elimination of factionalist filth".