

New evidence of an early Korean Trotskyist organisation in the late 1940s: Research note on the ‘Bill Morgan Report’

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In the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic I came across a post on Facebook that caught my eye immediately: images of a newly-discovered article from a Chinese Trotskyist journal of the 1940s containing news of a Trotskyist organisation in US-occupied South Korea.¹ This was astonishing because I’d never previously seen or even heard of any evidence of Korean Trotskyists in the 1940s. The closest thing that came to mind were one or two Korean communist intellectuals of the time who seemed to hold positions similar to those espoused by Trotsky, whether by distant influence or coincidence. But here it was, in black and white, in the Chinese-language journal *New Banner*²: an article about a Trotskyist seaman of unidentified nationality who had recently called into a port in Korea and encountered a substantial Trotskyist organisation called the Internationalist Communist Party of Korea. The report claimed that the party had split from the Korean Communist Party six years previously and saw itself as politically aligned with the Fourth International, although its leading members knew little about the FI and were eager for news about Trotskyists around the world and their positions on major current events. The Chinese article relates that the foreign sailor spent time with the leaders of the organisation and learned about political events in South Korea and the current situation of the non-Stalinist left there before leaving the country.

This newly-discovered article immediately raised a series of questions about who the mysterious sailor was and whom he had met in Korea in 1946, but above all it begged for corroborating evidence. It seemed highly unlikely that an article from a Chinese Trotskyist journal would be entirely fictional, so it had to be based on another source. But it also seemed unlikely that everything in the article could be correct, as the organisation described had never been heard of before. Moreover, the idea that the Korean Communist Party – which barely existed in 1940 – had suffered a Trotskyist split while under the most repressive period of Japanese colonial rule seemed far-fetched. Based on a few clues in the text, I had a hunch that the sailor mentioned in the article was likely to be American, or at least from an English-speaking country. So on the off-chance I would find something I began looking at issues of the US Trotskyist newspaper *The Militant* from around the time that the *New Banner* article was published in the first half of 1947. Quite quickly I found something promising: an article in the March 15th issue of the newspaper headlined: ‘What I Saw In Korea Under American Rule’ by a man named Bill Morgan.³ This article is written by a Trotskyist sailor from the US and describes his recent sojourn in US-occupied southern Korea. Morgan provides considerable detail and colour about the three weeks he spent in the southeastern sea port of Pusan, describing the poverty, black marketeering and the brutality of the police under US occupation. However, there is no mention of Korean Trotskyists and almost no discussion of the Korean left at all, until the enigmatic final sentences:

Korean Marxists have had a long and militant history. They are stronger today than ever. Only the reactionary policy of the Stalinists prevents the Korean workers from coming to open revolutionary grips with Wall Street’s oppression. The official Stalinist party in Southern Korea is disintegrating, however. Many thousands of workers have organized into new groups and are carrying on a militant class struggle.⁴

It struck me immediately after reading this article that there was little chance of this being a coincidence: Bill Morgan had to be the foreign sailor mentioned in the Chinese article on Korean Trotskyists and he had most likely written a more detailed private report which had informed that article. Presumably security considerations prevented Morgan and *The Militant* from publishing anything about his encounters with Korean revolutionaries, but there are clear hints in the lines

quoted above that the author knew about ‘new groups’ that were opposed to the policy of the Stalinist communist party in southern Korea.

There seemed to be the slightest glimmer of hope that an internal report by Bill Morgan on his stay in Korea might still exist in an archive somewhere, so I began to look at the catalogues of archives relating to US Trotskyists and Trotskyist organisations held at places like the Tamiment Library at New York University and the Hoover Institution Archives at Stanford. The latter archive holds both the Joseph Hansen Papers, which contain a folder of correspondence with ‘Bill and Ada Morgan’, and also the Papers of the Socialist Workers Party (the American Trotskyist organisation that published *The Militant* newspaper). Tantalisingly, in the finding aid for the SWP papers⁵ I found reference to a folder marked simply, ‘Korea, 1946’. With the help of David Palumbo-Liu at Stanford University I was able to obtain a scan of the contents of this folder and it turned out to be exactly what I had been looking for: Bill Morgan’s account of his visit to Korea. Curtly headed ‘Report on Korea’, and presumably intended only for the central committee of the Socialist Workers Party, the report runs to seven pages of typescript and contains much more detail than either the *New Banner* article or the report in *The Militant*. Moreover, it became obvious from reading the Bill Morgan report that the Chinese article consisted almost entirely of excerpts translated verbatim from the report.

Before delving more into the content of the report and the further questions it raises about Trotskyism in 1940s Korea, it is necessary to pause for some historical context. Until now the documented history of Korean Trotskyism only goes back to the late 1980s, when some of the works of Trotsky first began to be translated into Korean by activists and scholars. At the same time Trotskyist ideas began to break through the stranglehold of varieties of Stalinism on the Korean left since socialist politics had re-emerged in the late 70s and early 80s, after decades of dictatorship. The first work of Trotsky to appear in South Korea was *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*, which was translated and published in 1988.⁶ The first Korean organisation espousing Trotskyist and Third Campist positions – the International Socialists of South Korea – emerged in the early 1990s and it was not until the mid 1990s that some of the well-known works of Trotsky, such as *The Revolution Betrayed*,⁷ were finally translated. The emergence of new evidence that there was a Korean Trotskyist organisation more than four decades before the first work of Trotsky was ever published in Korean was therefore quite surprising. However, if we look at the objective conditions of US-occupied Korea in the late 1940s, the emergence of a Trotskyist current there does not seem so surprising.

During WWII many Trotskyists predicted that the war would give rise to a global wave of revolution on a scale last seen immediately after WWI. While this prediction proved to be wrong in a general sense, many colonial or former colonial countries did experience a revolutionary situation in the postwar period, usually aimed at achieving independence and implementing modernising social reforms. In Korea there was also a revolutionary feeling in the air as the country was liberated from 35 years of Japanese colonial occupation in August 1945. Koreans expected not only a return to independence but also substantial social change, including land reform, labour reform, nationalisation of industry and democracy.⁸ In effect, they anticipated changes in their society that at the time came under the general rubric of ‘socialism’. However, at the very moment Korea was liberated from the Japanese in August 1945 it was divided between the two superpowers, the US and the USSR. Stalin readily agreed to this partition of the peninsula in order to gain a bigger foothold for Russia in East Asia, ordering his advancing troops – who had already entered Korea on August 12 – to halt at the 38th parallel, just north of the capital Seoul. There were attempts in early September to form an independent national government on the basis of the ‘people’s committees’ that had sprung up all over the country after August 15, but this ‘Korean People’s Republic’ was swept aside by the US Army after it arrived at the port of Incheon on September 8 and instituted its military occupation government under General Hodge. Thus, from September 1945 Korea had

replaced one hated colonial power with two occupying armies, and the new occupiers set out from early on to find reliable allies in their sector and begin the process of ensuring a 'friendly' regime on the peninsula once they had left.

In the northern occupation zone, the Soviets took a somewhat different approach to the Americans in the south, co-opting the people's committees rather than outlawing them. They also moved swiftly to put their trusted Stalinist allies from various parts of the disparate Korean communist movement into positions of power. Most prominent among them was a certain former anti-Japanese guerrilla named Kim Il Sung, who had spent most of WWII as a Soviet Army officer in far eastern Russia. In 1946 the Soviets and their Korean allies quickly initiated a series of social reforms that went some way to fulfilling the hopes of liberated Koreans: completely overhauling the land tenure system, nationalising formerly Japanese-owned industry and enshrining formal gender equality in law.⁹ Thus a substantial gap opened up between the northern and southern zones, and the frustration in the US zone at the lack of democracy or social reform and the worsening economic situation exploded into a series of mass strikes, violent demonstrations and peasant uprisings in the autumn of 1946.¹⁰

All this created much potential for a revolutionary uprising in the south, but the policies of the Korean Stalinists tended to work directly against the revolutionary tendencies in Korean society. The Korean Communist Party, which re-formed in the autumn of 1945 and in August 1946 fused with another party to become the Korean Workers Party (with separate sections in north and south), was close to Moscow from early on, even in the south away from the direct control of the Soviets. As a result, when the question of a four-power trusteeship over the Korean peninsula became a major issue during the winter of 1945-46, the Korean communists toed the official Moscow line of supporting trusteeship negotiations between the US and Soviet Union, making them instantly unpopular among swathes of the population. Not only this, but the Stalinists in southern Korea took a generally passive or even at times supportive position with regard to the US military occupation, no doubt following instructions from Stalin that they should not rock the boat and upset the US-Soviet Joint Commission. As Bill Morgan notes in his report (interestingly, a point that is repeated in the *New Banner* article), the Korean communists stood candidates for the US military government's 'Interim Legislative Assembly' elections in the autumn of 1946, until they were forced to withdraw them by popular demand.¹¹ Taken together, the revolutionary situation and the lack of leadership from the Stalinist left show that there was a clear political space in US-occupied south Korea for a revolutionary socialist organisation that would oppose the US military occupation as well as the Soviet occupation of northern Korea and the Korean Stalinists who were beholden to Moscow. But until now there has been little evidence of such an organisation to the left of the Stalinist communist party, let alone an organisation that identified itself with Trotskyism.¹²

Turning to Bill Morgan's report, I will draw out some of the most interesting elements within the document and then conclude by looking at the big questions it leaves unanswered. First, it's worth noting that there is very little contextual information about the document, such as who exactly it was written for and when it was written. The document heading contains only the title 'Report on Korea' and a note that outlines the other places Morgan's ship called in at besides Korea. However, it can be assumed that the report was meant only for the internal use of the SWP and perhaps to be shared with other organisations within the Fourth International, since it clearly made it in some form to Trotskyists in China. The first part of the report describes Morgan's arrival in the southeastern port of Pusan (often called Fusan at the time, according to Japanese pronunciation) and his encounters with local black marketeers. He quickly set about trying to find Korean political contacts and struck lucky when he found a bookshop that had a single Marxist book on the shelves in English. This led to a conversation with the owner of the bookshop and a further meeting with him and a friend where they began to discuss socialist politics and the Trotskyist leaders in the US. According to Morgan the two Koreans then took him into their confidence and told him that they

knew of the Fourth International and were waiting to be contacted by comrades from the organisation. They also told him that they had split from the Korean Communist Party six years previously and that there were now four Marxist parties in Korea, including the official Stalinist party. The claim that there had been a split in the Korea communists six years before – eg in 1940 – is one of the most puzzling things in the whole document, since in 1940 all communists in Korea itself were either in prison or living underground and there was no Korean Communist Party to speak of.¹³ It seems possible that there was a misunderstanding here and Morgan actually misheard ‘six months’. There was much political turmoil on the left in Korea during late 1945 and 1946 and it is very likely that a number of new socialist parties were formed during this period.

After this, Morgan describes how he was introduced to more of the men’s comrades and learned that their program was “substantially the same” as the Trotskyist one he outlined and that their organisation was formally called the ‘International Communist Party of Korea’.¹⁴ On the following day Morgan was taken to address a mass meeting of the party’s followers in a warehouse five miles from the centre of Pusan.¹⁵ At the meeting he was told that “three thousand workers and intellectuals were present”. In a moment of some levity, Morgan says that he was introduced to the meeting as “Comrade from country which is the monster imperialist” and given the temporary pseudonym “Comrade Kim Boy”. After the mass meeting Morgan continued to spend time with the leaders of the organisation and came to know the leader by the initials L.B.S. He apparently had a publishing house in Seoul that published textbooks by day and printed Marxist works at night. Although he had published works by Lenin and Engels since liberation in 1945, he did not have access to works by Trotsky and was keen to read and publish his writings, especially on the Soviet Union. From L.B.S. Morgan learned that the International Communist Party of Korea was not the only organisation in the country that agreed with the Fourth International and that there were multiple groups based in different regions who needed to be united around a common programme. Apparently there was even a Korean organisation with a ‘third camp’ position close to that of the US Workers’ Party, who rejected the mainstream Trotskyist position of defence of the Soviet Union. The Korean comrades were most anxious for support from the Fourth International and apparently “begged for assistance on political work” including not only the despatch of books and papers to Korea but also a comrade who could “stay with them for a few months or more”, whom “they could support... and teach enough Korean to speak and write in about six or eight weeks of constant study.” In addition they asked to be put in touch with Trotskyists in Japan as soon as possible.¹⁶

In the final paragraphs of the report Morgan describes meeting some Koreans who had come down from the Soviet-occupied zone north of the 38th parallel and hearing their “horrible stories of looting, murder, rape and wholesale removal of villages and towns by the Russian Army”. Not only did these refugees from the north prefer to live in the American zone because they had the opportunity to organise there but, according to Morgan, many of them also held a defeatist position on the Soviet Union, like the third campists. On the last page of the report Morgan briefly discusses the current political situation in US-occupied south Korea, mentioning the failures of the Stalinist communists in south Korea with regard to the US military government’s interim legislative assembly elections. Morgan records that he left Korea for Japan on December 30th, 1946. If we note the period of ‘three weeks’ that he mentions in his article for *The Militant* it would appear that the whole of Morgan’s visit to Pusan fell within the month of December.

The Bill Morgan report is undoubtedly an important document for the history of the Korean left. It opens up the intriguing possibility of a Trotskyist current in Korean politics 40 years earlier than previously known and the existence of an organisation that, had it been more successful and not disappeared into oblivion, might have had a profound effect on the course of Korea’s history in the post-liberation period. Since discovering the report at the end of 2020 I have attempted to find corroborating evidence for the existence of the organisation described in the document in other places, including in Korean-language research on the period, but so far to no avail. The authenticity

of the document seems unquestionable, but this still leaves some fundamental questions about the accuracy of Bill Morgan's report. Did he actually witness a substantial, functioning Trotskyist organisation in Pusan in the winter of 1946?

It is noticeable that Morgan does not explicitly call the organisation he encountered 'Trotskyist'. He notes that the leaders were interested in reading and publishing the works of Trotsky, that the programme of their organisation was aligned with that of the FI and that they requested direct assistance from the FI, but this was clearly not an 'official' Trotskyist organisation. It seems that it was a spontaneous anti-Stalinist split from the official communist organisation that had similar criticisms of Stalinism to the global Trotskyist movement and had a vague awareness of its existence, presumably through the media rather than direct contacts. This raises the further question of when and how such a split came about and what the other non-Stalinist communist organisations were that Morgan is told about by his Korean contacts. As I noted above, the idea of a split from the Korean Communist Party in 1940 seems unlikely, not least because such a party did not really exist at that time. But during the tumultuous period of 1945-1948 it is quite feasible that there were a multitude of competing minor left-wing parties that have been largely forgotten by history. Even for a minor party though, the International Communist Party of Korea sounds quite impressive from Morgan's description: an organisation that could muster thousands of workers for a rally and had an armed militia patrolling the neighbourhood. For an organisation that no-one has heard of this sounds astonishing, but it is worth remembering the context in which Morgan visited Korea. He arrived at Pusan only two months after an armed uprising of workers and peasants had swept the southeast of Korea, which could help to explain both the level of fervour and mobilisation that Morgan witnessed and the fact that security was such an important consideration for left-wing organisations during the post-uprising period of repression.

Finally, there is the question of who the leaders of this organisation were and whether they can be traced in the historical record. Bill Morgan left a handful of important clues in his report, making this one of the most promising avenues for discovering more about the Korean Trotskyists of 1946-1947. Most intriguingly there is the appearance of the initials L.B.S. for the name of the man who was the leader and Morgan's main contact in the party. It looks very much like it stands for the three characters of a Korean name, probably with the surname Lee (or Yi), although I have not found a good candidate in my searches so far. There is also the fact that L.B.S. was the proprietor of a publishing company in Seoul. The years immediately after liberation in Korea saw an explosion of left-wing publishing after decades of Japanese repression and there have been some detailed studies of the numerous new publishing companies that sprang up, offering the possibility of identifying the textbook publisher mentioned by Morgan. Another route might be to look at local histories of the left and left-wing bookshops in Pusan to see if the bookshop that Morgan mentions can be identified or possibly even a locally-based left-wing organisation that has been overlooked by nationally-focused histories. Perhaps, due to the vicissitudes and destruction of mid-twentieth century Korean history (civil war and repressive states north and south) we may never know more about the International Communist Party of Korea. But I'm hopeful that more material could come to light and we might even find out what happened to the party and its leadership. Did the Fourth International ever get in contact with them after Bill Morgan's visit? Were the Korean Trotskyists crushed by the repression of the US Military Government and their allies in the South Korean right-wing? Or did they escape to the North, only to be purged by the formidable security apparatus of the Kim Il Sung regime? Perhaps they simply faded into obscurity in the maelstrom of the late 1940s? Any of these possibilities would help to explain why this early Korean encounter with Trotskyism was lost to history for the next 75 years.

1 The discoverer of this article in the Chinese archives was Yan Chaofan, a scholar based at Wuhan University.

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- 2 The article appears in *New Banner*, issue 16, p15. The journal was the monthly publication of the minority faction led by Wang Fanxi and Zheng Chaolin within the Chinese Communist League and a total of 20 issues were published in the period 1946-1948. Details can be found on the Marxists' Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/reference-books/new-banner/index.htm>
 - 3 Bill Morgan wrote frequently for *The Militant* on trade union issues and had apparently been a "leading militant in the unemployed movement". See: Cannon et al. 2004, *The Fight Against Fascism in the USA*, p121.
 - 4 *The Militant*, March 15, 1947, p3. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1947/v11n11-mar-15-1947.pdf>
 - 5 The finding aid can be found here: <http://pdf.oac.cdlib.org/pdf/hoover/socworpa.pdf>
 - 6 Published as *Yönsok hyöngmyöng, p'yöngga wa chönmang* by the socialist publisher Sinp'yöngnon.
 - 7 *The Revolution Betrayed* was translated into Korean by Kim Songhun and first published in 1995.
 - 8 These aspirations are well represented in the platform and policies of the People's Republic of Korea proclaimed on September 6, 1945 (see Chung 1956, *Korea Tomorrow: Land of the Morning Calm*, pp304-305). They were also expressed in spontaneous revolutionary actions on the ground: the seizure of factories by workers' committees and the seizure of land from landlords by peasants soon after liberation (see Chang 2020, 'Independence without Liberation: Democratization as Decolonization Management in U.S.-Occupied Korea, 1945-1948', pp81-84).
 - 9 For more on the social reforms of 1946 see: Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution*, chapter 3.
 - 10 The best English-language account of the 1946 'Autumn Harvest Uprisings' is in Cumings 1981, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol 1, chapter 10.
 - 11 While the Moscow-aligned communists in South Korea tended to hold back the radicalism of the Korean masses in the earlier period of the US occupation (1945-1946), they shifted left and became more confrontational in the later period (1947-1948) when the US-Soviet Joint Commission collapsed and the US military government became more repressive towards the left. See Han Kyuhan, 'Haebang konggan esö chwap'a üi chölyak', in Han Kyuhan et al 2018, *Marük'üsüjuüi ro pon han'guk hyöndaesa*, Seoul: Ch'aekkalp'i. For more on the interim legislative assembly see: Cumings 1981, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol 1, pp260-262.
 - 12 Factionalism within the Korean communists during the period after liberation has been quite well studied, including the story of the 'Changan Faction' who tried to re-found the Korean communist party in August 1945 but were quickly defeated by Pak Hön-yöng's more pro-Moscow faction. Some of these non-mainstream Korean communists, such as Im Hae, seem to have been quite close to Trotskyists on issues such as the nature of the Korean revolution (espousing a 'permanent revolution' position), but they have not been identified as Trotskyists as such. See: Sim Chi-yon 1987, *Chosön hyöngmyöng non yön'gu*, chapter 2.
 - 13 Between 1939 and 1941 there was an attempt to re-found a Korean Communist Party in Seoul, usually referred to as the 'Kyöngsöng K'om Group', but it was crushed by the colonial police. There were also many diasporic Korean communists in the Soviet Union, China and Japan during the late 1930s and early 1940s and so it is possible that the split referred to here happened outside of Korea. They sometimes formed separate Korean communist organisations but they were usually members of the local parties in their respective host countries, as was decreed by Comintern policy. Kim Il Sung, for example, was a member of the Chinese Communist Party during the 1930s.
 - 14 This is how Bill Morgan rendered the name of the organisation, although in the Chinese article it is changed to 'Internationalist Communist Party of Korea', a subtle but significant change. Without finding any of the organisation's own documents there is no way for us to know which was correct.
 - 15 It is worth noting that the Chinese article in *New Banner* incorrectly identifies the city that Morgan was visiting as Seoul. It is a mystery how such a mistake came about in the course of translation because Morgan is very clear in his original report that he only visited Pusan.
 - 16 Although writings by Trotsky had been translated into Japanese by this time, the first known Trotskyist organisation in Japan was the Japan Revolutionary Communist League which was founded more than 10 years later in 1957.