



Flags and Emblems of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Vexillidolatriy in its Purest Form

Dean Thomas

Vexillidolatriy—the reverence of flags—is not uncommon around the world. People in all countries gravitate around their national flag to some degree. However, one country stands out in its reverence of its national and internal flags and emblems. Known popularly as North Korea, this country's formal name is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and it is there that love of the flag is taken VERY seriously.

To those interested in vexillology, the DPRK demonstrates a reverence for its flags and symbols in a way that not even the United States does. Indeed, to its citizens, the DPRK flag is far more than a symbol of their nation, it represents to them their ideals and rationale taken to a level seldom seen in history. It may seem incredible to outsiders that the love that the citizenry has for its flags has been taken to such an extent, but given the turbulent history of Korea and the political evolution of the Korean peninsula since the end of the Second World War, such a reverence—and its underlying reasons—is quite logical, once people understand the forces of the past that acted on the Korean Peninsula.

Korea is a country that has had the geographic misfortune to be lodged between other, more powerful, nations that have used it through the centuries as a strategically-placed springboard to attack their neighbors. Japan, China, and Russia have had Korea under their sphere of influence at one time or another over the last millennium, with the United States adding its influence over the last half-century. As a result, Korea had been ruled by outsiders for a considerable period—either as a vassal state, or simply as a province of another country. For a time, ancient Korea had tried a policy of seclusion, but that

proved ineffectual over the long term, given the political and military aspirations of her neighbors.

The nation's history of conquest and forced subservience to foreign powers has scarred the Korean psyche, making the Korean people intensely nationalistic. This sense of nationalism manifests itself in the Korean people's resistance to foreign rule and influences, the reinforcement of Korean traditions, values, and language, and in a determination to stay independent and free of outside control.

So, while the political system—and its trappings—of the DPRK can be said to have been heavily influenced by the Stalinist Soviet Union, it would be unwise to say that the DPRK is a direct copy. Its evolution along socialist principles along with a firm grasp of Korean nationalism has resulted in a unique political system known as *Juche* (loosely translated as “Self-Reliance”) that is reflected in the symbolism of its flags and emblems, and in the attitude of the DPRK populace toward them.

This paper will attempt to explain the symbolism of the DPRK's flags and emblems, and to show just how revered they are in the eyes of the people and government.

The National Flag of the DPRK

The Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea refers to the national flag in Chapter VII, Article 170: “The national flag of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea consists of a central red panel, bordered both above and below by a narrow white stripe and a broad blue stripe. The central red panel bears a five-pointed red star within a white circle near the hoist. The ratio of the width to the length is 1:2.” (Figure 1)



Figure 1. The National Flag of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Source: Sebastian Koppehel, commons.wikipedia.org.

The description is simple, and thus the National Flag meets two of the positive criteria of flag design: easy to construct and easy to identify. But understanding the construction and description only goes part of the way. Comprehending the symbolism of the flag itself goes a long way to understanding the nation and its people.

Red, white, and blue are classic flag colors, used by a large number of countries. In the case of the DPRK, those colors have always been used in some form by Koreans, which is symbolic of the national character, plus red, white, and blue are regarded internationally as classic republican colors.

The color red predominates because—like the flags of the majority of socialist states—it represents sacrifice and socialism. The DPRK is first and foremost a socialist republic, plus the DPRK was formed in the aftermath of a traumatic period: the Japanese annexation and colonization of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945. Recalling the blood sacrifice of those resisting the Japanese (and other invaders) connects the past with the socialist ideals of the present, thus making this particular color in the flag the honored color: representative of the patriotic and fighting spirit of the nation.

The narrow white stripes bordering the top and bottom of the red panel represent the homogeneous Korean nation with its long history and resplendent culture. White is regarded as a sacred color to Koreans and its inclusion reflects this aspect of the Korean people.

The broader blue stripes (in relation to the white) at the top and bottom symbolize the desire to fight for the victory of the ideals of independence, peace and friendship in unity with the progressive peoples of the world, thus reflecting the republican ideals of the DPRK and its connection of those ideals to other countries.

The emblem that dominates all of these colors is the red five-pointed star on a white disc. Originally representative of communism and internationalism, since the 2009 and 2012 rewritings of the constitution have eliminated all references to Marxism-Leninism, this emblem has evolved—along with the constitution—in its meaning.

Originally, the emblem was said to merge the *tae-guk* emblem of Korea with the red star of communism, but with the changes to the constitution, so did the meaning of the star and disc. The white disc with the red star taken together now represents the political “bedrock” of the DPRK: the white segments that form the star’s outline can be taken to represent the three primary

tenants of the Juche philosophy of self-reliance: political independence (자주), economic self-sustenance (자립), and self-reliance in defense (자위).

Added to this are the two tenets of political social awareness espoused by the philosophies of the founding President of the DPRK, Kim Il-sung (김일성), and his successor after his death in 1994, Kim Jong-il (김정일), who himself passed away in 2011. The significance of this was enounced in 2012 by the current Supreme Leader of the DPRK, Kim Jong-un, at the 4th Congress of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea, who keyed the term: "Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism." He said: "Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is an integral system of the idea, theory, and method of Juche, and a great revolutionary ideology representative of the Juche era. Guided by Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, we should conduct Party building and Party activities, so as to sustain the revolutionary character of our Party and advance the revolution and construction in line with the ideas and intentions of the President (Kim Il-sung) and the General (Kim Jong-il)." (Note: The references to "President" and "General" is because Kim Il-sung has the posthumous title "Eternal President of the DPRK" and Kim Jong-il has the posthumous title "Eternal General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea.")

It can then be said that each of the other two white segments represents Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. Thus, with the other white segments representing the tenets of independence, self-sustenance, and self-defense, it forms and defines the red star and white disc of Juche socialism. (Figure 2)



*Figure 2: The red star and white disc of Juche socialism.
Source: Illustrated by the author.*

Taken together, the flag of the DPRK represents Korean history, sacrifice, idealism, and independence in a simple yet aesthetically pleasing form. The 1:2 ratio gives the flag a "streaming" look when flying in a breeze. Whether this ratio was chosen either for aesthetics or because it was influenced by the flag of the USSR isn't known with certainty, but regardless, the end result is pleasing when seen, and that makes for a good national flag.

The flag was adopted officially as the national flag of the DPRK on 8 September 1948—both as the national flag and civil ensign.

The Flag of the Workers' Party of Korea

Chapter 1, Article 11, of the Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea states: "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea shall conduct all activities under the leadership of the Workers' Party of Korea."

This article underpins the leading role of the Workers' Party of Korea in governing the country and its people. As a result, the images of the party's leaders and the emblem of the party itself are prominently displayed, and are treated with the same reverence as the national flag. Indeed, this flag can be regarded as *de facto* the co-national flag of the DPRK.

The flag itself is a red banner with a ratio of 1:2 (like the national flag), and bears in the center of the flag a yellow emblem which is a combination of three tools: a hammer, a long-handled sickle, and a calligraphy brush: representing the country's workers, the country's farmers, and the country's intellectuals. Indeed, the brush is itself used as a symbol of the Juche philosophy in one of the dominant monuments in the DPRK capital. Merged together, the emblem and colors represent the united front of all social classes in one party. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. The flag of the Workers' Party of Korea. Source: Muneyama (username) et al., commons.wikipedia.org.

Vexillologically speaking, the flag's design has clearly been influenced by traditional communist symbols of other socialist countries, but with the addition of the brush, and replacing the "traditional" sickle with the type used by Korean farmers, this flag clearly represents an indigenous version of communism. Like the national flag, this design is simple to construct and easy to identify.

However, there have been some variations in its design. One involved. This has involved reducing the size of the central emblem and placing it in the upper left corner of the flag, and the resulting larger red space used to place images of the leaders of the Party. Until 1994, it was the image of Kim Il-sung. After Kim Jong-il ascended to the Supreme Leadership of the WPK—and the DPRK—his image was added to the flag. (Figure 4)



Figure 4. The Flag of the Workers' Party of Korea with the images of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. Source: Tōri Richards, Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity (watchdog.org).

Smaller versions of this flag are in lapel pin form and are worn by all DPRK citizens—military and civilian—on the left breast of their outer garment, symbolizing their loyalty and fidelity to the party and its leaders. (Figure 5)



Figure 5. Flag-shaped lapel pin depicting Kim Il-sung and another worn on the lapel of the uniform of a member of the People's Army. Sources: C records (username), commons.wikimedia.org; yeowatzup (username), www.flickr.com/photos/yeowatzup.

It is not yet known whether incumbent Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un will have his image added to this version of the WPK flag, but if so, it is almost certain that the ubiquitous lapel pin will also be changed to reflect this.

The WPA emblem has been incorporated in the various military flags, seen at military parades, providing an unmistakable impression of the Korean People's Armed Forces as not only defenders of the country, but also of the party. (Figure 6)



Figure 6. North Korean troops in an armored fighting vehicle flying the WPK flag during the Victory Day Parade, 2013. Source: Stefan Krasowski, www.flickr.com/photos/rapidtravelchai.

The origin of the emblem was as a direct result of Kim Il-sung's input. This happened when the work to institute the emblem of the WPK was under way after Korea's liberation from the 40-year-long military occupation and colonization of the peninsula by the Japanese. Kim Il-sung had instructed the officials concerned that the party's emblem should represent the working class, the farmers, and the intelligentsia so as to symbolize it as "a united party of the working people that admits progressive elements of workers, farmers, and intellectuals and that the working class should be represented by a hammer, the farmers by a sickle and the intellectuals by a writing brush instead of a pen." Following this directive, officials drew a design as he instructed and presented it to him. This initial design showed a hammer standing vertically, and a sickle and a brush fanwise to the right of the hammer.

After carefully examining the design, Kim Il-sung said that the hammer and sickle in the design were alien things, not the Korean ones, and that the hammer used by the Korean workers and the sickle used by the Korean farmers should be drawn instead. He then suggested that the hammer, the sickle, and the writing brush should be crossed in the middle of their handles not only from the viewpoint of the design's composition but for the purpose of symbolizing the close unity of the working masses of Korea. He further proposed placing the hammer on the left and the sickle on the right with the brush at the center. He went on to stress that the brush should be surely placed at the center and placed a little higher than the hammer and the sickle so as to "make the design

proportionate and to give the meaning that all the workers and farmers should possess profound knowledge and raise their cultural standard so as to contribute to the building of a prosperous, civilized, independent, sovereign country.”



Figure 7. The Revolution Monument in Pyongyang. Source: Clay Gilliland (photographer) and Russavia (username), commons.wikipedia.org.

Usage of the DPRK National and WPK Political Flags

While the flags of the DPRK and the WPK are ubiquitous throughout the country, there are two locations in particular in the DPRK that symbolize the pride and importance of the flags in DPRK society: the capital city of Pyongyang and the Demilitarized Zone that marks the southern boundary of the nation.

Pyongyang

As the political, economic, and cultural capital of the DPRK, the city represents the aspirations and ideals of its builders and inhabitants. As such, the city is endowed with magnificent monuments, “assertionist” architecture, and impressive public facilities such as sports stadiums and the subway system. Adorning these structures are the symbols of the nation and ruling party. A visitor to the city would be overwhelmed by these structures, and the flags that prominently fly and hang everywhere. (Figure 8) Indeed, the mixture of flag display and architecture clearly demonstrates the power of the state, and the respect shown to it by the citizens.

This can be best emphasized by two major events that the DPRK is famous for: the military parades in Kim Il-sung Square and the Arirang Festival held at the Immense May Day Stadium. Not only military discipline and loyalty to both the country and the party is impressively demonstrated by such displays, but the reverence shown to the symbols of the country as well. The national flag, party flag, the plain red banner of revolution, and images of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il dominate throughout, along with patriotic slogan banners. (Figure 9)



Figure 8. Government building in Pyongyang. Source: David Stanley, www.flickr.com/photos/davidstanleytravel.



Figure 9. The DPRK flag paraded during the Arirang games, Pyongyang, in 2007. Source: Gilad Rom, wikipedia.commons.org.

A large number of the monuments in the city also utilize the National Flag and the WPK symbol as an integral part of their façades, reinforcing the equating of the love of the flag to the love of the country, and the WPK. (Figure 10)



Figure 10. The monument to the founding of the WPK in Pyongyang. Source: Mark Scott Johnson, www.flickr.com/photos/markscottjohnson.

The Demilitarized Zone

In the Armistice Agreement of 27 July 1953, which ended the Korean Conflict (known in the DPRK as the Fatherland Liberation War), the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) was created as both sides agreed to move their troops back 2,200 yards from the front line, creating a buffer zone 2.5 miles wide. The Military Demarcation Line (MDL) goes down the center of the DMZ and indicates exactly where the front was when the agreement was signed.

It is at the Joint Security Area at a place named Panmunjom—in a blue prefabricated building straddling the MDL—that one of the smallest, yet one of the most important DPRK flags, is located. It is a desk flag sitting beside a similarly-sized desk flag of the United Nations. Because the Republic of Korea (ROK), or South Korea, did not sign the armistice agreement, the UN flag rests there in its place. These two flags were as the result of intense negotiations over the size and disposition of the flags at the one place where both sides meet: the Joint Security Area. All aspects of the two flags—the height of the poles, the design of the flag’s bases, the finials, and the fringes—were the result of lengthy negotiations and visitors from both sides of the MDL are strictly warned not to touch either flag. (Figure 11)



Figure 11. The armistice room in Panmunjom, DPRK/ROK, in 1990. Source: Paul J. Everett, www.flickr.com/photos/37411273.

Not far away, in the village of Kijong-dong, is a huge DPRK flag. It flies from the world’s third-highest flagpole and weighs over 500 pounds. This flagpole and flag were erected as the result of a “competition” between North and South Korea.

The South Koreans have a village within the DMZ named Daesong-dong. In the 1980s, when a large flagpole flying the South Korean flag was set up there, a taller flagpole with a larger flag was set up in Kijong-dong in response. When

the Daesong-dong flagpole was extended in size to “top out” the Kijong-dong flagpole, DPRK authorities lengthened theirs in a tit-for-tat one-upmanship flagpole game (called “the Flagpole War”) that the South Koreans eventually gave up on. For a long time, the flagpole at Kijong-dong was the world’s tallest, until two giant-sized flagpoles were set up recently in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, and Baku, Azerbaijan. Still, the impressive height and lattice-work construction of the flagpole at Kijong-dong dominates the area. (Figure 12)



*Figure 12. The flagpole at Kijong-dong, DPRK.
Source: Justin Paul Barrass (username Jpbarrass),
commons.wikipedia.org.*

An illustration of how this particular DPRK flag is regarded by South Korea is revealed in the fact that the Seoul government had put a bounty on the flag some years ago. Any person who removed that flag from Kijong-dong and delivered it to the Blue House in Seoul would receive US\$500,000. However, given that any potential bounty hunter would have to get through one of the most heavily-guarded regions on the planet, remove a flag weighing more than 500 pounds, then get it back through the DMZ, the likelihood of such an expedition succeeding would be non-existent.

Other References to and Uses of the National Flag in the DPRK

The flag is held in high esteem in both military and civil terms. Not just in overt displays of military might and patriotism such as Arirang and the massive military parades—designed to impress both visitors as well as the local populace—but in other manners, in awards, artwork and product-branding, and more modest displays.

One of the most prestigious awards in the DPRK's systems of honors and decorations is the Order of the National Flag. Named after the DPRK national flag, it is a decoration awarded in three classes.

The order is a pentagonal-shaped pin-on badge bearing the national colors and Juche star. The level of the award is denoted by the metal color of the badge: gold for First Class, silver-gold for Second Class, and silver for Third Class. Until the Order of Kim-Il-sung was created, this was the DPRK's highest honor. Still, this award is highly regarded and the recipients are recognized by the populace as heroes of the Republic.

In more “mundane” displays of the DPRK flag, the flag is often featured in stamps, logos of state-owned enterprises, and in patriotic art. Stamps of the DPRK typically use either simple depictions of the flag, or scaled-down pictures of patriotic artwork involving the flag.

One example of corporate branding is the national airline of the DPRK—Air Koryo—uses the flag of the DPRK as its company logo and fin-flash identifier. It's simple—yet striking—design contrasts with the more garish designs of other civil airlines and clearly shows its country of origin. (Figure 13) Likewise with the emblem of the DPRK's Olympic Committee.

Patriotic artwork showing the DPRK is displayed everywhere. Some are in the form of traditional oil paintings (note the flag that the KPA officer is standing on). (Figure 14) Others come as postcards that entwine the flag with patriotic slogans and images of citizenry striving for a common goal. (Figures 15 and 16) Those pieces of patriotic artwork that involve other flags usually show those flags not getting accorded the same respect. It is not surprising that the United States flag is always depicted being dishonored in some way. (Figure 16)



Figure 13. Koryo aircraft at Sunan International Airport, Pyongyang. Source: yeowatzup (username), www.flickr.com/photos/yeowatzup.



Figure 14. Painting of a wartime patriotic scene depicting the DPRK flag with the United States flag being maligned. Source: Mark Scott Johnson, www.flickr.com/photos/markscottjohnson.



Figure 15. Patriotic postcard depicting DPRK flags. Source: John Pavelka, www.flickr.com/photos/28705377@N04.

Figure 16. Patriotic artwork on a postcard depicting the DPRK flag and a tattered United States flag. Source: Cynthinee (username), www.flickr.com/photos/cynthinee.



For displays of flags outside those of large parades, they are usually grouped together to create flag montages. It is not uncommon to see displays of the national flag, the WPK emblem, and the plain red flag of revolution, which also appears on monuments and more overt patriotic displays.

Needless to say, while the DPRK smiles upon patriotic displays of their national flag, acts of disrespect towards the flag are taken very seriously. When

protests against the DPRK in South Korea involve defacing, burning, or tearing up a DPRK flag, the news media of the DPRK makes it very clear as to what the country thinks of such antics.

The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) is known for making very blunt statements in its press releases that include a lot of socialist jargon and threatening rhetoric, so when displays of DPRK flag desecration are remarked on by the KCNA, with comments such as “Despicable elements of the ruling clique in Seoul allowing monstrous and shameful desecrations of our Sacred flag,” while sounding like a typical report, in such cases this really cannot be regarded as “standard party talk.” Their definition of the DPRK flag as “sacred” is really no exaggeration, and displays like this repeated on DPRK television easily brings a North Korean’s blood to boil.

Members of the Korean Friendship Association who have visited the DPRK comment that the flag displays they have seen stand out for two major reasons: first, they have never seen any flags that were faded or tattered—even outside Pyongyang the flags are pristine (which means that there certainly isn’t any shortage of flags or cloth in the DPRK), and, second, that they are certainly not displayed in a frivolous manner. Comparing this with the use of the United States flag at home, the DPRK flag is not displayed outside businesses or used in non-flag products such as clothing or items such as shopping bags or displays advertising domestically-sold merchandise. Despite this, the respect shown to the national flag by its citizenry is ubiquitous.

I had the opportunity to talk with a former DPRK citizen (who asked not to have his name mentioned), and when I asked him about how he and his fellow citizens regarded the DPRK and WPK flags, he said:

The national flag was taught to us from the beginning to be something to be respected. As I grew up, this respect was something that grew. It was a source of pride to see the flag as it represented our country. While the authorities were constantly looking out for any unpatriotic—meaning disloyal—behavior, I can say that the respect we showed for the national flag was far more out of pride than fear, particularly when seen in newscasts about victories at the Olympics and our football [soccer] team. The flag was thus treated in a manner designed to be accorded the utmost respect. This was the case with the WPK flag, though for a very different reason. That emblem represented the authority of the Party over everybody, and as we learned from a very early age, the Party was always right and never to be questioned—let alone criticized. So we quickly learned to respect the WPK flag for the power and fear that the Party had over our lives. In

every village, town, city, the WPK emblem was there and you knew that behind that emblem were those who enforced the authority of what it represented. Our having to wear the WPK pins with the images of the Great and Dear leaders on our shirts only reinforced this realization.

When I asked if this sentiment was a universal one, he answered:

We have been taught to keep our feelings to ourselves as displays of emotion outside sanctioned activities are regarded as unproductive and suspect. Close friends can very easily become bitter rivals ready to show loyalty to the Party by reporting what you say and do, so asking people if you fear the WPK flag could be taken as political unreliability. But I can say that the people living in the DPRK think of themselves first and foremost as Korean, and that given our history of foreign domination by Japan, China, Mongolia, and Russia, we are truly proud to be an independent nation once again, hence the love for the primary symbol of our independence: the national flag.

Other Flags and Emblems of the DPRK

This paper would not be complete without mentioning the state arms and the other official flags of the country—those of the Korean People's Armed Forces and the flags representing high political office.

The Supreme Commander's Flag

This flag denotes the Supreme Commander of the Nation, and of the Korean People's Armed Forces. An amalgamation of the Juche star and a silver wreath upon a red flag, this flag represents the current Supreme Commander, Kim Jong-un. This flag has been seen in ratios of both 2:3 and 1:2. (Figure 17)



Figure 17. Flag of the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army. Source: Great Brightstar (username), commons.wikipedia.org.

The Flag of the Korean People's Armed Forces

This flag is a variation of the national flag, with the state arms of the DPRK replacing the Juche star and disc. The Hangul inscription reads: “For the Independence of the Homeland and the People!” (Figure 18)



Figure 18. Flag of the Korean People's Armed Forces. Source: Jaume Ollä, commons.wikipedia.org.

Korean People's Army

This flag—again a variant of the national flag of the DPRK—has a different design on the reverse of the flag. The obverse bears the KPA's emblem, the numbers 4.25, which refers to the date of the founding of the KPAF (25 April 1932), and some versions bear the mottoes: “The Unification and Independence of the Motherland” (left) and “For the Freedom and Liberation of the People” (right) (Figure 19).

The reverse bears the emblem of the Workers' Party of Korea, thus representing the political loyalty of the army to the ruling party. While this particular illustration does not show any mottoes, pictures of military parades have shown mottoes depicted on the reverse.

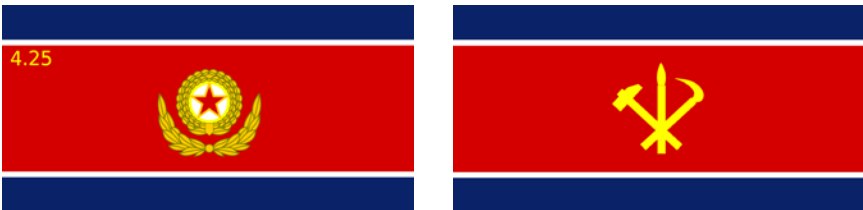


Figure 19. Obverse and reverse of the flag of the Korean People's Army. Sources: Great Brightstar (username) and Denelson83 (username), commons.wikipedia.org.

Korean People's Navy

Following a similar layout to the flag of the Korean People's Army, this flag is nonetheless unusual in that the predominant color is not red. Still, the mottoes on the obverse on some versions are the same as that on the KPA flag, and the reverse of the flag bears the emblem of the Workers' Party of Korea, symbolizing the navy's political allegiance. The small amount of red is shown in the date of the founding of the Korean People's Armed Forces, and in the Juche star, that is in the center of the navy's emblem, similar to the army's, though with a larger outer wreath and an anchor surmounting the inner wreath. (Figure 20)



Figure 20. Obverse and reverse of the flag of the Korean People's Navy. Sources: Great Brightstar (username), Fry1989 (username), and Andrusc (username), commons.wikipedia.org.

Korean People's Army Air Force

The KPAAF flag—like the naval flag—is a design in which red does not predominate. Instead, light blue (representing the sky) shows clearly what branch of the armed forces this flag represents. A wreathed Juche star (though without a supporting lower wreath), and stylized wings makes up the emblem of the air force. Otherwise, the KPAAF date, mottoes (on some versions), and the WPK emblem layout follow the same pattern as that of the army and navy flags. Red is only shown in the central Juche star. (Figure 21)



Figure 21. Obverse and reverse of the flag of the Korean People's Army Air Force. Sources: Great Brightstar (username), Coyote sprit (username), and Denselson83 (username), commons.wikipedia.org.

The simplicity of the design of the DPRK flag also manifests itself in the roundel used on DPRK military aircraft: The red star and white disc of Juche socialism surrounded by red, white, and blue rings taken from the three colors of the national flag. (Figure 22)



Figure 22. The roundel used on aircraft of the Korean People's Army Air Force. Sources: Ketiltrout (username of D. V. Wiebe), Sarang (username), and Fry1989 (username), commons.wikipedia.org.

DPRK Worker-Peasant Red Guards Militia

The Worker-Peasant Red Guards is a paramilitary force in North Korea. It is the largest civilian defense force in the DPRK with an estimated strength (2007) of 3.5 million. It was established on 14 January 1959 by Kim Il-sung and is not only under the control of the National Defense Commission and the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, but is also attached to the Workers' Party of Korea under its Department of Civil Defense. The militia is organized on a provincial/city/town/village level, and structured on a brigade, battalion, company, and platoon basis. It is equipped with infantry small arms, some mortars and anti-aircraft guns, and even modernized older equipment such as multiple rocket launchers like the BM-14 and older Ural D-62 motorcycles, although some units are unarmed logistics and medical units. (Figure 23)

The obverse of the Red Guards flag consists of a plain red background with the WPRG emblem—a wreathed, gold-outlined red star—placed in the center,



Figure 23. Obverse of the flag of the Worker-Peasant Red Guards. Source: Expatkiwi (username), commons.wikipedia.org.

with the mottoes: “The Unification and Independence of the Motherland” (above) and “For the Freedom and Liberation of the People” (below). Like the other service flags, the reverse of the flag shows the emblem of the WPK.

The First Flag of the Korean People's Army

This flag is held in high reverence by the Korean People's Armed Forces. Displayed in a military museum in Pyongyang, it was the flag first shown by Kim Il-sung when he proclaimed the founding of the Anti-Japanese People's Guerilla Army (AJGPA) on 25 April 1932. The flag is a red rectangular banner (now slightly worn), inscribed with the golden-yellow Hangul inscription: “Anti-Japanese People's Guerilla Army.” The AJPGA was formed as “the first Juche-oriented revolutionary armed force of the Korean people,” and in March 1934 was reorganized into the Korean People's Revolutionary Army (KPRA). This flag can be seen in a number of artistic depictions and on DPRK postage stamps.

State Arms

Chapter VII, Article 168, of the Socialist Constitution of the DPRK states: “The national emblem of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea bears the design of a grand hydroelectric power plant under Mount Paektu, the sacred mountain of the revolution, and bearing the beaming light of a five-pointed red star, with ears of rice forming an oval frame, bound with a red ribbon bearing the inscription ‘The Democratic People's Republic of Korea’.”

The state arms—clearly influenced by the arms of the USSR and its constituent republics—show the history of the country by the representation of Mount Paektu, the works of the country's workers, intellectuals, and farmers by the hydroelectric dam and ears of rice, and the guiding principle of the state by the red star of Juche socialism. The state arms predominates on official documents, on the facades of DPRK diplomatic missions, and on various flags. (Figure 24)



Figure 24. The state arms of the DPRK. Source: Ercimetro (username), commons.wikipedia.org.

Unification Flag

The flag below—depicting the Korean Peninsula in blue on a white background—is used in sporting events where athletes from North and South Korea compete as one unified team. Carefully designed to reflect neutrality between both Koreas, it represents the desire of both sides for eventual reunification. (Figure 25)



Figure 25. The Unification Flag of Korea. Sources: Alkari (username) and Valentim (username), commons.wikipedia.org.

Conclusion

The flags of the DPRK can be seen to represent two things: love of the country, and the authority of the WPK. The sheer ubiquity of the national flag and political flags reinforces not only the sovereignty of the DPRK as an independent nation, but also the authority and ideology of the state. Vexillidolatriy in the DPRK is therefore not a small thing. Both patriotism and demonstrating loyalty to the state play a role in this. Also, the fact that the DPRK defines itself to its people as a nation under siege helps gravitate people to rally around the flag.

Some people would argue that these trappings really show nothing more than totalitarian control, and those who oppose such a system of government would see logic in such an argument: particularly with those flags and symbols of the WPK prominently displayed around the country. Still, despite the means that both the WPK and KPA use to assert their control and claim legitimacy in the eyes of the people, the love of the national flag as a national symbol of independence, and love of the national anthem (which is devoid of political terminology), demonstrates that the people of the DPRK—while indoctrinated

with the politics of the WPK—are still, first and foremost, Koreans and that is what defines their love and respect for their national flag. Patriotism—rather than politics—thus guides the people. This, combined with the history of Korea, guides the people in their desire to see a reunified Korea without any foreign presence.

Bibliographic Summary

The textual narrative for this article was compiled from a variety of sources, including the Korean Central News Agency, *Flags of the World*, Wikipedia, the Korean Friendship Association, the Socialist Constitution of the DPRK, and an interview with a former citizen of the DPRK conducted in August 2012.



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