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Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Developments in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy (Hawai'i Studies on Korea)

Tatiana Gabroussenko

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An understanding of contemporary North Korea's literature is virtually impossible without an investigation of its formative period, 1945–1960, which saw a gradual transformation from the initial "Soviet era" to a Korean version of "national Stalinism." This turbulent epoch established a long-lasting framework for North Korean literature and set up an elaborate system of political control over literary matters, as well as over the people who served in this field.

In 1946 Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) leader Kim Il Sung described the country's writers as "soldiers on the cultural front," thus clearly defining what the nascent Communist regime expected from its intellectuals. As a result, many literary nonentities were rewarded with fame and success (often only to be relegated once again to obscurity within a few years) while many outstanding luminaries of the past were erased from the pages of official publications or even lost their lives. The Soviet cultural impact brought new tropes, artistic images, and rhetoric, which were quickly absorbed into the North Korean discourse. However, the cultural politics of the DPRK and the USSR revealed profound and irreconcilable disparities that were rooted in the different political conditions and traditions of each country.

Soldiers on the Cultural Front presents the first consistent research on the early history of North Korea's literature and literary policy in Western scholarship. It traces the introduction and development of Soviet-organized conventions in North Korean literary propaganda and investigates why the "romance with Moscow" was destined to be short lived. It reconstructs the biographies and worldviews of major personalities who shaped North Korean literature and teases these historical figures out of popular scholarly myth and misconception. The book also investigates the specific forms of control over intellectuals and literary matters in North Korea. Considering the unique phenomenon of North Korean literary critique, the author analyzes the political campaigns and purges of 1947–1960 and investigates the role of North Korean critics as "political executioners" in these events. She draws on an impressive variety and number of sources?ranging from interviews with Korean and Soviet participants, public and family archives, and memoirs to original literary and critical texts?to present a balanced and eye-opening work that will benefit those interested in not only understanding North Korean literature and society, but also rethinking forms of socialist modernity elsewhere in the world.

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