

An Emotional Relationship: Trust, Admiration, and Fear in North Korea-Zimbabwe Relations, 1976-1988

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Abstract

Despite being located faraway from one another, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung and Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe formed an unlikely friendship during the late 1970s and 1980s. As guerilla fighters-turned postcolonial leaders, these two autocrats developed close emotional bonds built around admiration, fear, and trust. Using archival sources from the United Kingdom's National Archives, North Korean press reports, and journalistic accounts, this article emphasizes emotions as a window into examining this Afro-Asian alliance. From wanting to emulate North Korea's land reform program to sending a group of librarians and academics to the communist state to learn from Pyongyang's educational system, Mugabe's government admired the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as a model of socialist development during the 1980s. Fearing instability at home, Mugabe also sought North Korea military assistance to squash his political rivals. Finally, Mugabe trusted Pyongyang as a "war-time friend" that had always been there for his African state. Thus, Zimbabwe continues to align itself in the post-Cold War era with North Korea while much of the world cuts off ties with the increasingly isolated state.

Key Words: North Korea, Zimbabwe, *Juche*, International Relations, Robert Mugabe, Kim Il Sung, Korean history, History of Emotions

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1. Introduction

Building on recent scholarship that positions emotions as a vital facet of international relations, this article argues that North Korea and Zimbabwe formed an “affective community” during the 1980s that revolved around trust, admiration, and fear. As political scientist Emma Hutchison (2016; 2018) describes, “‘Affective communities’ can be understood to be forms of community distinguished by widely-held and collectively understood forms of feeling.” Political scientist K.M Fierke (2013, 90-94) explains, emotions are a “form of world-making” that have a history and are a “rational measure of value.” Thus, emotions deserve inquiry as a mode of foreign policy-making amongst nation-states, particularly small postcolonial Third World countries that navigated the complexities of the Cold War world. While emotions have been used as a tool of international relations analysis for terrorism, Israeli-Palestinian relations, and Allied Powers coordination during the Second World War, this article is one of the first studies to use emotions as a way to evaluate a historical case of Third World solidarity (Costigliola 1998, 791-805; Hutchison 2010, 65-86; Head 2016, 95-113).

During the Cold War era, North Korea’s Africa policy revolved around two major objectives. First, North Korea aimed to undermine South Korean influence on the continent. As international relations scholar Jide Owoeye (1991, 643) explains, “It is indeed confirmed in this enquiry that, all things being equal, the degree of interest that North Korea exhibits toward African states is a function of the relevance of those countries to its anti-Seoul diplomacy.” In Pyongyang’s attempt to establish itself internationally as the legitimate and sole government on the Korean peninsula, the Kim family regime launched a diplomatic offensive against the South Korea and sought to establish relations with as many foreign governments as possible vis-à-vis Seoul. Second, as a vocal supporter of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, the North Korean government felt an obligation to assist liberation movements and socialist-oriented states in Africa. Kim Il Sung, a former guerilla fighter himself during the 1930s anti-Japanese struggle in colonial Manchuria, naturally formed sympathies for anti-colonial actors in Africa. During the Cold War, southern Africa became a space of intense conflict

between Western supported-apartheid forces and Eastern Bloc-supported liberation movements, such as Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) (Owoeye 1991, 640-642). It is within this community of "frontline" African states and socialist-oriented independence movements that Pyongyang formed close relations with ZANU.

During its 1970s guerilla war against white minority ruled-Rhodesia for Zimbabwean independence, Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA, the armed wing of ZANU) was supported by the DPRK as Kim Il Sung's regime sent military supplies to the African guerilla leader. Thus, a high degree of trust was established between Mugabe and Kim prior to independence. While the Soviet Union aided ZANU's rival political party the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), the People's Republic of China and North Korea assisted ZANU during the war for Zimbabwean independence (Somerville 1984, 73-108; Alexander and McGregor 2017, 49-66). The Soviets regarded ZANU as a reactionary splinter faction of ZAPU and thus unrepresentative of the Zimbabwean independence movement. The Soviets inaccurately believed that ZAPU would come out of the conflict victorious (Somerville 1984, 91-93). After their rejected requests for military support from Moscow, ZANU adopted an increasingly Maoist line in its international affairs. For example, ZANU grouped the world into two blocs: the imperialists, which included the Western powers and the Soviet Union, and the anti-imperialists, led by China (Reed 1993, 41-42). The Sino-Soviet split had far-reaching effects on anti-colonial movements in southern Africa as radical groups often had to rely on one communist power vis-à-vis the other. It was within this complex Cold War world that Mugabe found North Korea's ability to maintain equidistance between Moscow and Beijing and gain aid from both sides impressive. The political autonomy of Kim Il Sung's system greatly appealed to ZANU.

After Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, the newly decolonized African state under the leadership of Mugabe admired North Korea's model of socialist development, Kim's personality cult, and the DPRK's youth mobilization program. Mugabe sought to emulate parts of the North Korean social, political, and economic system in his nascent African state. In addition to admiration, the

emotion of fear also made Mugabe gravitate towards Pyongyang's orbit of diplomacy as Mugabe feared domestic upheaval and thus requested North Korean military advisors, which were well known for their brutal security tactics, to instruct his military guard on how to suppress internal dissent. Finally, trust developed between the two Third World autocrats in the late 1970s and 1980s. The DPRK was a relatively small and remote mountainous republic in Northeast Asia located between much larger countries and led by a former guerilla fighter, President Kim Il Sung. Thus, Pyongyang shared similar mentalities of armed struggle, sovereignty, and independence with Harare (known as Salisbury prior to 1982). Mugabe understood that anti-imperialist North Korea would not operate as a neo-colonial power in his newly independent country.

The three emotions of admiration, fear, and trust formed one of the closest Afro-Asian alliances during the 1980s. Rather than frame the North Korea-Zimbabwe relationship as a simplistic friendship of two oddball dictatorships, I argue that the two states formed an "affective community" wedded by the feelings of admiration, fear, and trust. Kim Il Sung and Robert Mugabe were both former guerilla fighters, who had partially lived in exile during their anti-colonial struggles, and then returned to their newly independent countries as charismatic autocrats (Suh 1995; Meredith 2002; Ranger 2004, 224-225; Norman 2008). These similar life experiences made the two leaders' comrades-in-arms and forged long-standing emotional bonds between their two governments. Both leaders prioritized collectivism, revolutionary vigilance, and militancy in their respective nation-states.

As the first study to use recently declassified sources from the United Kingdom National Archives in investigating North Korea's historical relations with Zimbabwe, this article aims to open a new pathway into understanding Pyongyang's foreign policy from a history of emotions framework. Files from the UK National Archives are particularly illuminating on this topic as the British government, the former colonizers of Rhodesia, kept a close eye on the ground in the Zimbabwean capital via its diplomats and officials. Reports from the UK High Commission in Harare and the British Foreign Office often showed a nuanced understanding of Zimbabwean domestic politics.

The only other comprehensive study on North Korea-Zimbabwe relations was a *Cold War History* article by Lyong Choi and Il-young Jeong (2017, 329-349). While Choi and Jeong emphasize the realpolitik considerations of the North Korea-Zimbabwe relationships, I stress the affective bonds formed between these two postcolonial states. Choi and Jeong (2017, 332) argue the “decision-making [of Mugabe and Kim Il Sung] was mainly driven by their strategic thinking based on realistic calculation” and that the two leaders had “mistrust” between each other. The evidence of “mistrust” that Choi and Jeong (2017, 331) use are South Korean diplomatic documents that indicate Zimbabwe initiated secret negotiations with Seoul to extract economic aid. While North Korea’s economy was becoming increasingly stagnant during the 1980s, this article explains that Pyongyang’s military and economic assistance to Harare was driven by selflessness, self-sacrifice, and solidarity. The fact that Zimbabwe reached out to South Korea for economic aid does not indicate “mistrust” between Harare and Pyongyang but rather that Mugabe’s nascent government struggled to bolster its economy and did not discriminate ideologically when it came to asking for assistance from the international community.

This article also seeks to place the Pyongyang-Harare axis within the context of new scholarship on South-South cooperation in Cold War historiography. With the opening of former Eastern bloc archives in the 1990s, a new Cold War history emerged that reframed communist powers as rational actors and smaller nations as having agency and not acting as mere proxies of the world’s superpowers (Gaddis 1998 2006; Smith 2000, 567-591; Chen 2001; Luthi 2008; Radchenko 2009). Recently, the Global South has received considerable attention by historians as a battleground of ideologies and developmental theories during the Cold War era (Gleijeses 2003 2013; Westad 2007; Shubin 2008; Mazov 2010; Friedman 2015, Hatzky 2015; Hong 2015; Byrne 2016; Muehlenbeck 2016; Brazinsky 2017). While North Korean archives remain closed to researchers, this article uses UK archival documents, North Korean press reports, and journalistic accounts to shed light on South-South cooperation between Pyongyang and Harare from the mid-1970s to late 1980s. Additionally, this article positions emotions within the field of Cold War international history (Gould-Davies 2003, 193-214). Rather than

subvert emotions as irrational and ahistorical, this study positions the affect as a focal point of DPRK-Zimbabwe relations.

2. Admiration

From the late 1970s to the late 1980s, hereditary succession from Kim Il Sung to his son Kim Jong Il and a move away from Marxism-Leninism to a more nationalistic turn in ideology defined North Korean political culture. As part of the North Korean government's effort to bolster its legitimacy and gain support for its unorthodox hereditary succession process, the Korean Workers' Party held a Congress in early October 1980. The DPRK government invited Robert Mugabe to be a guest of honor at the Korean Workers' Party Sixth Congress, which formally announced Kim Jong Il as Kim Il Sung's successor (Choi and Jeong 2017, 339). It was during this visit to the DPRK that Mugabe became attracted to the idea of North Korea as an appropriate model of Third World development.

Mugabe was particularly impressed with North Korea's land reform after Japanese colonialism. At a October 14, 1980 press conference after visiting the DPRK, Mugabe said, "The North Koreans have been faced, after Japanese withdrawal, with the need to re-distribute land to the peasants. But they had done much more than this. Despite a population of seventeen million and a territory more than 85% mountainous, they were producing an exportable food surplus from a cultivable area of 250 million hectares. " Mugabe added, "Zimbabwe had much to learn from the North Korean experience."¹⁾

In addition to finding the North Korean land reform program admirable, Mugabe found North Korea's mass games appealing. During his October 1980 visit to the DPRK, Mugabe brought along his Minister of Education and Minister of Youth and Sport in order "to see the excellent work which the North Koreans had done in organizing youth and education and to consider what lessons Zimbabwe could draw from this." Mugabe "said that he had been most impressed with the discipline and efficiency of the various gymnastic and other demonstrations laid on for his

1) N.W Browne, British High Commission in Salisbury, "Zimbabwe/North Korea," October 21, 1980. Reference FCO 36/2764, Folder title: Korean Involvement in the Rhodesian Problem, 1980, UK National Archives.

benefit by youth groups.”²⁾ According to one of his former supporters, Mugabe “came back almost a different man” after visiting North Korea in 1980. Mugabe “was tremendously impressed by the stadiums full of people doing mass calisthenics. He came back wanting to become president, like Kim. There was no more *primus inter pares* about him after that (Johnson 2017).” In the mid-1980s, North Korea later sent mass gymnastic display experts to Zimbabwe, which delighted Mugabe. In January 1987, Mugabe met the DPRK’s ambassador to Zimbabwe, Hi Chun-Ok, and “expressed thanks to the Korean mass gymnastic display experts for their active help to Zimbabwe in gymnastic display.”³⁾ The socialist aesthetics and collectivism fostered by North Korea’s Mass Games appealed to Mugabe. Broadly speaking, North Korea’s social engineering, centralization, and regimentation allured Mugabe who sought the same degree of dictatorial control and power that Kim Il Sung wielded inside the DPRK.

During the Sixth Party Congress, Kim Il Sung described North Korea’s philosophy of *Juche* (radical self-reliance) as a model for the Global South. At the Congress, Kim said, “In the public eye of the world, our nation is widely regarded as the country of *Juche*, and the model country for socialism.”⁴⁾ The Hungarian delegates at the Congress noted, “Emphasizing the uniqueness of the Korean road, the independent model for building socialism were presented to set an example mainly for the developing countries.”⁵⁾ Mugabe, an attendee at the Congress and new leader of a developing country, naturally began to admire North Korea’s *Juche* philosophy, which promoted a fervently anti-imperialist attitude based on independence, self-sufficiency, and self-strengthening. In 1981, Mugabe opened a *Juche* study center at the Zimbabwe University (Choi and Jeong 2017,

2) Browne, “Zimbabwe/North Korea,” October 21, 1980. Reference FCO 36/2764, UK National Archives.

3) “Zimbabwean Prime Minister Meets DPRK Ambassador,” Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), January 9, 1987.

4) “Report to the Political Bureau on the Korean Workers’ Party’s 6th Congress and on the celebrations of the 35th anniversary of the foundation of the KWP,” October 16, 1980, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, MNL OL XIV-J-1-j Korea 25-005249/1980. Obtained by North Korean Materials Archive, IFES, Kyungnam University, and translated by Imre Májer, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123775>.

5) “Report to the Political Bureau on the Korean Workers’ Party’s 6th Congress and on the celebrations of the 35th anniversary of the foundation of the KWP,” October 16, 1980, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive.

330). This admiration for *Juche* in Zimbabwe continued even after Kim Il Sung's death in 1994. In 2007, South Africa-based journalist R.W Johnson reported, "Visitors to the offices of high-ranking officials in Robert Mugabe's beleaguered government in recent weeks have noticed the same book open for study: *Juche! The Speeches and Writings of Kim Il Sung*." A Zimbabwean governmental insider told Johnson, "Some may actually believe this stuff, but it's more that they want to understand where the President is coming from (Johnson 2007)." Mugabe's idea of self-reliant development and non-alignment naturally blended well with North Korea's *Juche* philosophy.

In an attempt to incorporate women into their political platform, Mugabe's party ZANU published writings focusing on women's roles in the Zimbabwean revolution. A ZANU Women's League pamphlet explained, "As a Liberation Movement with a socialist program we are particularly interested in the role and position of women in Socialist countries, so we can, by comparison, judge our progress or lack of progress in the process for the advancement of our own women." ZANU looked at North Korea's rhetorical uplifting of women as a model of radical social change. The ZANU Women's League pamphlet said, "Kim Il Sung advocates some measures for purposes of organizing and advancing women such as the following: Casting aside backward customs and habits handed down from old society. Intensify education among women so as to increase their political awareness and grasp of knowledge."⁶) Mugabe's political party admired the DPRK's mobilization of women into political agents.

In addition to admiring North Korea's peculiar version of socialism, Mugabe's armed forces adopted several other military concepts from the [North] Korean People's Army (KPA). The *Choson Kyongbidae* (North Korean Security Corps) became the model for the Fifth Brigade and Mugabe's Presidential Guard. Pledging complete loyalty to Mugabe's ZANU party, these units operated as bodyguards for Mugabe's power structure and adopted the slogan, "We support the Prime Minister Comrade Robert Gabriel Mugabe which means support for the whole

6) "Liberation Through Participation: Women in the Zimbabwean Revolution," *Writings and Documents from ZANU and the ZANU Women's League* (New York: National Campaign in Solidarity with ZANU Women's League, 1980), accessed June 18, 2018, http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC52_scans/52.Liberationthroughparticipation.zanu.pdf.

population (Evans 1991, 12-15).” This slogan closely parallels North Korea’s collectivist idea of *ilsim-dangyeol* (“single-minded unity”), which was promoted by Kim Il Sung in 1967 as a power consolidation measure (Tertitskiy 2017).

Due to their arrogance and poor treatment of local staff, the first group of North Korean military instructors in charge of training the Fifth Brigade were sent back to Pyongyang in 1983 and replaced by British advisors. However, another group of North Korean military instructors arrived in 1983 to train the Zimbabwe People’s Militia (ZPM).⁷⁾ The ZPM modeled themselves on the North Korean concept of Worker-Peasant Red Guards, which organized itself based on civilian defense of provinces, districts, and villages. The ZPM also adopted North Korea’s leader cult system. For example, the ZPM’s training center was named after Mugabe and there was an attempt to translate North Korea’s “Song of Kim Il Sung” into chiShona with Mugabe as the central figure of the song. Similar to the presence of high-ranking KPA personnel in the North Korean Politburo, several high-ranking Zimbabwean military commanders were also appointed to the ZANU Politburo in 1984 (Evans 1991, 12-15). The DPRK’s militarism appealed to the Zimbabwean leadership, which craved the same discipline, war-readiness, and cultish leader worship present in North Korea’s version of socialism.

By early 1985, the 20,000-man strong ZPM operated as a fully functional reserve army closely linked to Mugabe’s power base in the countryside. In January 1985, the ZPM organized a mass rally to show its solidarity with the DPRK. Two months later, the North Korean military instructors left Zimbabwe.⁸⁾ However, North Korea’s Cold War-era links with Zimbabwe did not end with the collapse of its military ties. In 1986, three Zimbabwean academics and officials went to North Korea on a cultural visit and came back to Harare lauding the North Korean educational system. Upon returning to Africa, one of the travelers, the deputy librarian at the University of Zimbabwe, stated, “The Korean experience was far more rewarding, gratifying and interesting than previous visits to other countries, socialist, capitalist or non-aligned. In a word, it was a worthwhile, informative and

7) “North Korea’s Military Involvement in Africa,” *Vantage Point* [a South Korean-government funded publication on North Korea published during the Cold War era] (March 1986), 16-17.

8) “North Korea’s Military Involvement in Africa,” *Vantage Point* (March 1986), 16-17.

memorable visit (Mupawaenda 1987, 44-45).” The admiration and emulation of the North Korean system penetrated deeply into Zimbabwean politics and society.

However, it was not just Zimbabwe that admired the DPRK’s successes as the admiration went both ways. During Mugabe’s August 1985 visit to North Korea, the DPRK’s state-run media lauded the accomplishments of Zimbabwe’s postcolonial development. The Korean Central News Agency said, “After the independence of the country, the industrious Zimbabwean people under the correct leadership of Comrade Robert G. Mugabe have achieved great successes in the struggle for overcoming the obstacles lying in the way of their advance and building a new prospering Zimbabwe along a unique line of building socialism, while decisively repulsing the subversive activities and sabotage of the imperialists, colonialists and racists.” The Korean Central News Agency’s report added, “Zimbabwe is actively striving to strengthen the Non-Aligned Movement and achieve the complete liberation of southern Africa under the banner of anti-imperialism and independence and developing the friendly and cooperative relations with all countries on the basis of mutual respect for national sovereignty.”⁹⁾ Despite economic struggles and political turmoil in Zimbabwe, the North Korean press admired Mugabe’s commitment to sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and revolutionary socialism.

3. Fear

After more than a decade of fighting the white minority Rhodesian government, Robert Mugabe emerged as the leader of the newly independent Zimbabwe in 1980. Faced with political rivalry from ZAPU, rising ethnic tensions, and South African encroachment, Mugabe feared a loss of control and sought to consolidate his fragile grip on power in the early 1980s. During his October 1980 trip to North Korea, Mugabe signed a secret military agreement with Kim Il Sung. As part of this agreement, Kim Il Sung agreed to provide Mugabe with a large amount of free arms and ammunition, around 18 million U.S dollars worth, and around one

9) “Dailies Welcome Visit,” Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), August 28, 1985.

hundred instructors in order to teach Zimbabwean troops how to use the North Korean-made weapons.¹⁰⁾ The British and U.S governments urged Mugabe to turn down the North Korean offer of military assistance. However, according to the British Foreign Office, Mugabe felt that “he could not afford to turn down an offer of free equipment” and that the “[North] Koreans had supported ZANLA [the armed wing of ZANU] during the Rhodesian conflict” and “it was important politically for him to demonstrate his non-aligned credentials.”¹¹⁾ Fear had persuaded Mugabe that the barrel of a gun was the best means to the retention of his political power in Zimbabwe.

On August 12, 1981, one hundred and six North Korean military instructors arrived in Zimbabwe to train the five thousand members of the Fifth Brigade, which was entirely composed of former ZANLA fighters that fought under Mugabe during the war for independence. Kim Il Sung also gave Mugabe tanks, armored cars, and 4,500 AK-47 rifles for free. Mugabe said the Brigade “would be trained and equipped purely for defense purposes and not for use outside Zimbabwe.”¹²⁾ However, this proved to be false as the Fifth Brigade was also designed with an intention of weakening South African government-backed insurgency in southern Africa. For example, the Fifth Brigade and North Korean instructors trained a Mozambican counter-insurgency unit, the “Clean Brigade.” In mid-1982, these three groups fought together in a military operation against the South African-supported Mozambican National Resistance Movement (RENAMO) (Bermudez 1990, 87-88; Moorcraft 2011, 119-127).

In Zimbabwe, these 106 North Korean instructors quickly wore out their welcome. With their hefty salaries paid by Mugabe’s government, lavish spending in Zimbabwe’s most expensive hotels, and demand for new staff cars, the North Korean advisors irked the more proletarian senior Zimbabwean military personnel.

10) The Country Study Series by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, “North Korea’s Relations with the Third World,” *A Country Study: North Korea* (June 1993), accessed June 18, 2018, <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-9642.html>.

11) Carrington, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “North Korean Military Assistance to Zimbabwe,” August 20, 1981, Reference FCO 106/464, Folder title: North Korean Military Assistance to Zimbabwe, 1981. UK National Archives.

12) Carrington, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “North Korean Military Assistance to Zimbabwe,” August 20, 1981, Reference FCO 106/464, Folder title: North Korean Military Assistance to Zimbabwe, 1981. UK National Archives.

After a month of no training being conducted by the North Korean instructors, the British High Commission in Salisbury commented, “Disillusionment [with the North Koreans] is already setting in.”¹³⁾

When the North Korean military instructors arrived in the Zimbabwean capital city of Salisbury (which became known as Harare in 1982), a 150-man British military assistance training team was training Zimbabwean armed forces. This created the awkward situation of British and North Korean advisors teaching the Zimbabwean armed forces, albeit different units, at the same time. The British Foreign Office commented, “The North Koreans’ track record on military training in Africa is a poor one and we doubt the Zimbabweans will find their efforts very rewarding. The arrival of the North Koreans is certainly not causing us to look again at our very own aid program. Our relations with Mugabe’s government remain very close and cordial.”¹⁴⁾

The British government initially wondered whether Beijing or Moscow orchestrated North Korea’s large military assistance program with Zimbabwe. However, it became clear that the DPRK initiated and organized this military assistance program on its own. The British Foreign Office explained, “Mugabe himself clearly regarded the North Koreans as in the mold of the Yugoslavs and as genuinely non-aligned. Although we would disagree with this assessment in part, we too regarded the North Koreans as very much their own masters.” The British Foreign Office added that the North Koreans in Zimbabwe “were not acting as surrogates for the Soviet Union.”¹⁵⁾ As for PRC involvement in the DPRK-Zimbabwe military relationship, the First Secretary of the Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe told his British counterpart, “The North Koreans played their cards close to their chests and had not consulted Beijing.”¹⁶⁾ The lack of domineering tactics by the North Koreans resonated with

13) Colonel CG Henshaw, British High Commission in Salisbury, “North Korean Assistance,” September 11, 1981, Reference FCO 106/464, Folder title: North Korean Military Assistance to Zimbabwe, 1981. UK National Archives.

14) SWJ Fuller, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “Zimbabwe/North Korea,” August 14, 1981. Reference FCO 106/464, Folder title: North Korean Military Assistance to Zimbabwe, 1981. UK National Archives.

15) HL Davies, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “Zimbabwe/North Korea,” August 13, 1981, Reference FCO 106/464, Folder title: North Korean Military Assistance to Zimbabwe, 1981. UK National Archives.

16) British High Commission in Salisbury, “Discussion with Mr. Sun Guotong, First Secretary, Chinese Embassy,” Date Unknown. Reference FCO 106/464, Folder title: North Korean Military Assistance to Zimbabwe, 1981. UK National Archives.

staunchly anti-imperialist Mugabe, who feared both communist and capitalist superpowers. Mugabe told British officials in 1981 that he detested the Soviet Union's "bullying tactics."¹⁷⁾

The North Korean military instructors focused on ideological instruction and Taekwondo training for nine months. This emphasis neglected the more important tactical training for the Fifth Brigade.¹⁸⁾ Despite their lack of effective training, the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade was deployed to Matabeleland, the home of the Ndebele ethnic group that historically opposed Mugabe's Shona tribe and supported his main political rival Joshua Nkomo, in January 1983. Mugabe alleged that this campaign merely intended to root out violent bandits. Mugabe's government ominously called this operation *Gukurahundi*, which means in chiShona [the language of Zimbabwe's Shona tribe], "The rain that washes away the chaff from the last harvest, before the spring rains."

It became clear from the start of their deployment that the Fifth Brigade operated differently from the rest of the Zimbabwean armed forces. According to the 1997 report from the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ), "The Fifth Brigade soldiers made it clear once they were deployed that they should be regarded as above the law.... and answerable to nobody but Mugabe." In addition, the CCJPZ report explains,

Fifth Brigade had completely different communication procedures: their codes and radios were incompatible with other units. Their uniform was also different, its most distinctive feature by the time they became operational in 1983 being their red berets... The use of AK-47s, recognized by their distinctive bayonets and curved magazines, is another distinguishing feature. In addition, the Fifth Brigade traveled in a large fleet of vehicles, which were [North] Korean in origin, although this fleet did not last long, falling to pieces on the rough Zimbabwean terrain.¹⁹⁾

17) SWJ Fuller, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "North Korean Military Assistance to Zimbabwe," July 7, 1981. Reference FCO 106/464, Folder title: North Korean Military Assistance to Zimbabwe, 1981. UK National Archives.

18) "North Korea's Military Involvement in Africa," *Vantage Point* (March 1986), 16-17.

19) The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ), *Breaking the Silence: Building True Peace – A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980 to 1988* (Harare: Africa Synod House, February 1997), 46, accessed December 1, 2017, <http://davidcoltart.com/wp-content/uploads/2006/10/breakingthesilence.pdf>.

With their inflated sense of superiority and North Korean training, the Fifth Brigade quickly unleashed a campaign of fear, brutality, and violence in northern Matabeleland.

This North Korea-trained Fifth Brigade carried out a genocidal program of terror that inflicted mass chaos and casualties on the Ndebele people. Within a period of six weeks, the Fifth Brigade killed more than two thousand civilians, beat thousands of people, and destroyed hundreds of homes. The Fifth Brigade infamously utilized public executions (a fear tactic regularly used by the security apparatus in the DPRK) and kidnappings as a way to incite fear into local communities. This campaign of terror by the Fifth Brigade continued intermittently until 1988.²⁰⁾ The CCJPZ report concluded that the Fifth Brigade specifically targeted civilians and that the unit tortured more than 7,000 people and killed more than 3,000 people from 1983-1988.²¹⁾ The Fifth Brigade learned its violent military tactics and brutality from their North Korean military advisors. Fear of his political overthrow made Mugabe into a brutal dictator that carried out genocidal actions against his own citizens.

4. Trust

Kim Il Sung had previously supported Mugabe's ZANLA with military training during the Zimbabwean War for Independence in the mid-1970s, which built trust between the two governments during the 1980s.²²⁾ Beginning in 1976, several members of ZANLA trained in North Korean military camps and learned how to use explosives (Wessels 2010, 130). On September 13, 1978, the Korean Workers' Party primary newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* declared militant support for the Zimbabwean people's independence struggle and said, "The Zimbabwean people who enjoy the unanimous support and encouragement of the world's people will

20) CCJPZ, *Breaking Silence*, 47-48; xvi.

21) Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, *Report on the 1980s Disturbances in Matabeleland And the Midlands* (March 1997), accessed November 29, 2017, <http://www.rhodesia.nl/Matabeleland%20Report.pdf>.

22) "North Korea's Military Involvement in Africa," *Vantage Point* (March 1986), 16.

surely overthrow the racist regime and win freedom and liberation.”²³) In 1978, Mugabe visited the DPRK for the first time and requested further military assistance from Kim Il Sung. In 1980, on his second visit to North Korea, Mugabe told Kim, “My memory of our first visit is still extremely vivid... [as you had] had heard all about me and the national struggle I was leading.” Mugabe continued, “My request for aid would thus be granted substantially as submitted because our just cause was also the just cause of the Korean people and the Workers’ Party of Korea. And the aid was truly given [to] us in accordance with that undertaking (Schwartz 2001, 29).”

As a former guerilla fighter himself, Kim Il Sung was not going to abandon Mugabe once he obtained power in newly independent Zimbabwe. As the British High Commission in Harare explained in 1981 regarding the signing of the military pact between Kim and Mugabe, “The old relationship between ZANU/ZANLA and North Korea is the basis for this [military] arrangement.”²⁴) Mugabe said that the North Koreans “had offered a free gift, which he could not refuse from a war-time friend.”²⁵) This sense of trust mattered a great deal to the regime in Harare as Pyongyang had unconditionally supported their liberation struggle and remained close comrades after Zimbabwe’s national independence from white minority rule. North Korea had even agreed to purchase some of Zimbabwe’s surplus crop of tobacco in June 1980 in an attempt to boost the nascent African state’s economy.²⁶)

In late August 1985, amidst the turmoil of *Gukurahundi*, Mugabe visited the DPRK for the third time and said at a banquet in Pyongyang, “The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s avowed championship for self-determination, economic independence and South-South cooperation is as well known as the Great Leader’s tenacious pursuit of international peace and security.” Mugabe continued, “For this reason, we are grateful for your continued material, political and moral support towards our efforts to deal with the critical situation in southern Africa

23) “Chimbabūwe ininūi t’ujae kudin ryōndaesōngūl ponaenda,” *Rodong Sinmun*, September 13, 1978.

24) British High Commission in Salisbury, “North Korean Military Assistance,” May 29, 1981. Reference FCO 106/464, Folder title: North Korean Military Assistance to Zimbabwe, 1981. UK National Archives.

25) British High Commission in Salisbury, “North Korean Military Assistance,” June 1, 1981. Reference FCO 106/464, Folder title: North Korean Military Assistance to Zimbabwe, 1981. UK National Archives.

26) NE Sheinwald, British High Commission in Salisbury, “South Korea/Zimbabwe,” July 23, 1980. Reference FCO 36/2764, Folder title: Korean Involvement in the Rhodesian Problem, 1980, UK National Archives.

which now poses a real danger to our developing democratic and socialist state.”²⁷⁾ It was clear that Mugabe trusted the DPRK to be a strong supporter of his developing state and assist his genocidal campaign to suppress internal dissent.

In January 1987, during the end of the *Gukurahundi* campaign in Matabeleland, Mugabe visited North Korea for the fourth time and met with Kim Il Sung. In the DPRK, Mugabe declared, “The people of Zimbabwe will always remember the invaluable assistance they received from their Korean friends during the struggle for national independence.” Mugabe added, “We shall continue to be most grateful to our friends, among them the DPRK, for assistance rendered to enable us to increase our capacity to defend our unity, territorial integrity, and national survival.”²⁸⁾ In 2010, North Korea’s economic and commercial representative to Zimbabwe published an article in the local Zimbabwean press and wrote, “Many African countries like Zimbabwe which are currently building new societies do not forget [the] immortal exploits rendered by President Kim Il Sung who made great contribution to their independence and socio-economic development.”²⁹⁾ The DPRK also lauded Zimbabwe’s version of socialism and stated, “Whenever looking back on the past, the Zimbabwean people are determined to defend the gains of revolution, not to repeat the slavish life under racism.”³⁰⁾

As a way to repay the DPRK government for their years of friendship, Mugabe awarded a contract to the Mansudae Overseas Studios, a North Korean art company responsible for building statues, monuments, and memorials abroad, in 1982 to build a National Heroes’ Acre to commemorate the victorious war for independence. As historian Tycho Van der Hoog (2017) explains, “The use of North Korean monuments is often misunderstood as a simple post-colonial phenomenon in which corrupt African leaders order monuments from a catalogue to promote nothing more than themselves.” Van der Hoog clarifies, “Instead, the existence of such monuments can only be satisfactorily explained through the historical connections that existed between the southern African liberation

27) “Mugabe Speaks at Banquet,” Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), August 28, 1985.

28) “Zimbabwean Government Delegation Visits Korea,” *The Pyongyang Times*, January 31, 1987.

29) Kim Yong Nam, “DPRK Advocates Peace, Love,” *The Herald* (April 15, 2010). Thanks to Andrea Berger for sharing this article with me.

30) “Socialism in Zimbabwean Style,” *The Pyongyang Times*, April 25, 1987.

movements and the DPRK which have been fostered since the 1960s (Van der Hoog 2017, 6-7).” The trust formed between the DPRK and Zimbabwe during the war for independence later led Mugabe to entrust North Korean statue-builders to literally shape his Party’s historical heroism.

In addition to allowing North Korean artists to mythologize his Party’s anti-colonial history, Mugabe also entrusted his state security to North Korea. After declining an offer from East Germany, Mugabe asked the North Koreans in 1981 to help set up his government’s intelligence services (Chaigneau and Sola 1986, 6). Mugabe trusted the DPRK government so much so that North Korean security corps came to Harare to help the Zimbabwean government set up their security apparatus.

5. Conclusion

Despite North Korea becoming increasingly isolated from the international community during the post-Cold War period, Zimbabwe stood by Pyongyang’s side even while the Kim family regime pursued nuclear weapons. After North Korean leader Kim Jong Il’s death in 2011, a high-level official from Mugabe’s political party said that Kim Jong Il “was our great friend and we are not ashamed of being associated with him (Moran 2011).” In 2013, Mugabe signed an “arms for uranium” agreement with Pyongyang. Mugabe said of the deal, “North Korea has always been ally of this country since the liberation struggle days against white minority rule.” He continued, “They have trained our soldiers, and now the press acts as if it’s a discovery that this deal exists. What is painful about the issue? Is it not a fact that all nations buy weapons from one another? (Mushekwe 2013).” While many countries in the Global South closed off diplomatic ties with Pyongyang in the 1990s and 2000s, Harare continued theirs. In 2016, Zimbabwe’s educational system adopted North Korea’s style of Mass Games into its official curriculum.³¹⁾ While the North Korean angle is predictably underscored in official

31) Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, “Mass Displays: Infant Syllabus, 2015-2022,” (2016), accessed June 19, 2018, <https://syllabus.globtorch.com/php/Mass%20Displays%20Infant.pdf>.

documents, footage from Zimbabwean Mass Games are almost neo-Pyongyang in style and aesthetics.³²⁾ Thus, the North Korean connection is still alive in Zimbabwe today.

Rather than approach North Korean foreign policy from the vantage point of tit-for-tat realpolitik or ideological considerations, this article focused on the emotional bonds created between Zimbabwe and the DPRK. Perhaps more than in liberal democracies, admiration, fear, and trust mattered a great deal to the personal dictatorships of Kim Il Sung and Robert Mugabe. Not only was their government's security and reputation under strain in the 1980s, their own personal safety was tied to the maintenance of their respective systems. Thus, the two autocrats formed an unlikely friendship forged from a common background as anti-colonial guerilla fighters-turned-postcolonial leaders. On an emotional level, the two leaders understood where the other was coming from. In addition, North Korea's development, with its regimentation, militarism, and centralization, greatly appealed to the security-conscious Mugabe. While both Kim and Mugabe proved to be horrifically violent dictators with atrocious human rights records, they nonetheless have emotions similar to that of the average world citizen and these emotions should be understood within the context of strategic thinking and foreign-policy making.

32) ZimdiTv, "2017 Mass Display @37TH Independence celebrations," April 18, 2017, *Youtube*, accessed 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwjfWXVyeNw>.

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