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The Forgotten Anarchist Commune in Manchuria

Where World War II Began

Francesco Dalessandro

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Retrieved on 14th January 2021 from www.fifthestate.org
From Fifth Estate #407, Fall, 2020

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During World War II the famous Hollywood filmmaker Frank Capra was commissioned by the U.S. Military to make a seven-part documentary film series titled “Why We Fight.” Its purpose was to counter Nazi propaganda films and justify U.S. involvement in the war to soldiers and civilians.

The first film in the series, “Prelude to War,” locates the origin of the conflict in the Japanese invasion and conquest of Manchuria in 1929 through 1932. But there were less known equally significant goings on in Manchuria that the film does not present. These have also been left out of most books and articles covering the history of the area.

In those years in Manchuria, the Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Soviet armies (the last with more or less undercover intervention), faced each other. All of them fought against the Army of the North, the military force of the Manchurian Anarchist Commune that was established in the late 1920s in the north of Manchuria. The Manchurian Commune was a revolutionary experiment as

important as the Magonist Revolution of Baja California of 1911, the Makhnovist insurgency in Ukraine in 1918, and the Spanish Revolution of 1936.

Yet, the important part anarchists played in that great social experiment is all too often ignored or downplayed.

For centuries, Manchuria was a refuge for immigrants and exiles from Korea, Russia, China, Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

In 1910, the Japanese government began its annexation of Korea. Many Koreans fled to Manchuria, among them, a large number of anarchists who were very active in the exile communities.

By the mid-1920s, Korean exiles established three autonomous self-governing districts—the Jeongen, Chanren, and Shinmin districts—all free from the Japanese presence and from the Chinese warlords and local Manchurian feudal lords.

They developed independently of governments or warlords for several years due to a combination of factors including the engagement of the local population, the weakness of the Chinese state, the distance of the Japanese empire, and the ruggedness of the mountain terrain.

The districts formed a self-defense military force, the Korean Independence Army, HG, (the Army of the North) to fight for independence from Japan and to protect the areas that had been liberated against their enemies. The HG was led by General Kim Jaojin (or Kim Jwa-Jin). Kim was among those who abhorred and fiercely resisted Japanese colonization of Korea.

In 1920, he joined the Korean Independence Army (MA), a guerrilla force where he demonstrated great leadership in fighting the Japanese troops. At the same time, he was attracted to anarchism by his relative Kim Jong-Jin.

In 1925, Korean anarchists proposed that the guerrilla fighters led by Kim Jwa-jin, Kim Hyok and No Ho Choi Jung-so and others, form an independent self-governing New Popular Society in the Shinmin district of Manchuria. The guerrillas accepted the proposal and began working to implement it.

From the beginning, many anarchists were part of the project including Kim Jo-ann and Cheoung Shin. The project quickly gained the support of large numbers of local peasants and workers because of its foundation on self-organization.

Among anarchists, Kim Jao-jin became known as the Korean Makhno because, like the Ukrainian anarchist fighter, he combined military skills with dedication to creating independent, self-governing producer and consumer cooperatives and self-defense associations based on the principles of individual freedom and social equality for workers and peasants.

The peasants and workers were invited and helped to establish their own systems of self management and economic cooperation and the necessary organizational structures. They created a commune for what they hoped would be a sustainable libertarian revolution, emphasizing autonomy in the context of cooperation within and between those with various productive capacities.

The commune aimed to implement cooperative activities such as improving the operation and management of farms, collective buying and selling, and establishing mutual aid societies and other organizations people needed.

In addition, cultural and educational activities were promoted through the establishment of primary and secondary schools to encourage individual and social development of necessary manual skills and intellectual knowledge.

In 1929, the Shinmin District was renamed the Association of the Korean People in Manchuria (KPAM). Grassroots discussions and decisions occurred in village meetings that sent delegates to district-wide and confederal conferences.

There were eight specialized departments for the zone: self-defense, agriculture, education, finance, propaganda, youth, public health and general affairs. The delegates at all levels were ordinary peasants and workers whose official salaries were similar to those of other workers. They did not acquire any new privilege while taking their turns serving in the administrative departments.

Ha Ki-Rak, a Korean anarchist historian, reports that the HMY-M (the Korean Anarcho-Communist Federation) considered these structures as reinforcing anarchist ideals: “Each assembly decides action plans to discuss the budget of the population and approves the balance-sheet following the principle: from each according to his/her capacity and to each according to his/her needs.”

The Commune was able to expand to neighboring districts such as the Heilongjiang (Black Dragon River) and came to include a triangular area bounded by the Amur River to the East, the valley of the river Sungchangho to the West, and the road to Harbin-Hunchun to the South. It encompassed 13,500 square miles and was home to some 2,000,000 people.

However, by the beginning of the 1930s, the situation of the Commune began to erode. The Japanese government sent 35,000 imperial troops into Manchuria and installed a puppet government, the Manchukuo in 1931.

At the same time, the Korean Communist Party, directed from Moscow, began infiltrating the Commune and systematically assassinating its anarchist leaders. Kim Jwa-jin was murdered in January 1930.

Together, the Japanese Army, the North Korean Communist Army, and the Communist Party infiltrators, along with some Chinese troops surrounded the Commune from the outside and inside and eventually destroyed it.

Most surviving anarchists went into hiding, but continued to engage in guerrilla warfare during World War II. After the war ended in 1945, anarchists experienced repression in both North and South Korea. Nevertheless, the traditions of anarchism are once again inspiring radicals on the peninsula.

Although some books and articles dealing with this important revolutionary episode have been published during the last decade or so, much more historical research about it is necessary because it constitutes an essential part of anarchist history of struggles for liberation and of radical movements in the 20th century.

Knowing about such history can help us imagine new ways of resisting the elites trying to carve the world and our minds into their spheres of influence.