

Review: Andre S. Natsios, The Great North Korean Famine: Famine, Politics, and Foreign Policy, United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington D.C., 2001

Pages: 295

Brutal Reality of Famine

The author has written a comprehensive and academic analysis of this “famine in slow motion” which killed up to 3M North Koreans (perhaps more). The impassive style of writing makes the devastation even more horrific than a more emotional or personalised account.

The fact the DPRK’s famine was self-inflicted by its evil Socialist system of economic destruction is interesting, though in part peripheral.

The author has researched indicators and strategies employed in all famines. E.g.,

- They occur under authoritarian regimes.
- Populations are reduced (e.g., families abort children).
- The elderly are starve (voluntarily or otherwise).
- Cannibalisation occurs.
- Black market food prices rise as farmers seek super-normal profits.
- There are more land sales.
- Animal populations plummet.

On the political side, the fault is clearly with the DPK, two-fold for responding too late to aid offers (only in 1996), and even then siphoning off aid to Pyongyang and party cadres.

Those in the decadent West unaware of such information will receive a huge shock when famine strikes, which may be just one nuclear weapon away.

Foreword (pp. ix-xii)

How to balance moral values against political, diplomatic, and geostrategic interests.

Introduction (pp. xiii-xxi)

The famine lasted 1995-1998.

The Chinese famine of 1958-62 killed 30M

When Germany stripped Greece in WWII to supply Rommel in North Africa, 500K Greeks died of famine.

Famines wipes out entire families and cities.

Famine arises when food-purchasing and production ability falls at the same time prices are increasing.

The author: reviewed 1,000 emails from 1996-1998 from NGOs; defector testimony (including Hwang Jong Yop; DPRK official communications; and Chinese refugee testimony.

Totalitarian regimes fear their populace the most.

I) Roots of the Crisis (pp. 1-22)

By 1995, only the DPRK and Cube were left as true believers in Socialism, which began with Russia's revolution in 1917.

In 1932-3, Stalin destroyed the 'wealthy' middle-class Ukranian kulaks.

In Korea, 1748-9, a famine under King Yongjio killed 500K: "the spectacle of starving people eating corpses was common."

The DPRK has accused China and Russia of abandoning Socialism.

The DPRK would exchange worthless goods for Soviet food and oil subsidies.

Shortages began well before official famine beginnings.

Only 15-20% of North Korea is arable land.

Kim Il Sung (KIS) ordered corn mountainside cultivation, which caused disastrous erosion and flooding, *reducing* arable land.

In 1953, 5M Koreans left for the South

KIS' policies were Leninism: mechanisation, chemicalisation, irrigation, and electrification. Modern science and Marxism could help realise his utopian dreams.

Juche: "take no risks, make no changes, and consider no innovations."

The DPRK stopped paying off debt to the West in 1976, and Soviet nations in 1994, meaning it no longer had any credit rating.

Some actually prosper during famine by exploiting high prices.

II) Inside North Korea: Prefamine Indicators (pp. 23-36)

Young women replace traffic lights which aren't used to save electricity.

Market-based famine indicators: increasing seed cost; seed shortages; seed-eating (farmers usually keep 10% of seed for replanting); land and farm sales; animal sales; wild food consumption.

Trailing indicators: death rates; mass migrations; stunting and nutritional deficiency.

Over-sixties have the highest mortality.

Malnutrition causes face swelling, hair discoloration, and skin lesions.

Life seemed to go on as normal though in Pyongyang and in party cadre families.

III) The Hidden Famine (pp. 37-54)

Dan Oberdorfer: “According to foreign diplomats, the [Pyongyang] population was periodically screened, and the sick, elderly, or disabled, along with anyone deemed politically unreliable, were evicted from the capitol.” [p37]

Authorities would create Potemkin villages for visiting NGOs.

KIS: “When you open a window to the West, flies come in.”

Historical famine triggers: dekulakisation; Great Leaps Forward; forced resettlements (Ethiopia, 1984-5, after the 1974 coup against Emperor Haile Selassie).

IV) Surviving the Famine: Along the Chinese Frontier (pp. 55-88)

By 1999, China was fining anyone a years’ wages for concealing a North Korean refugee,

Mt Paekdu was the legendary birthplace of the Korean people.

Strategies: reduce population (families would abort children); starvation of the elderly; human trafficking (some women were resold five times and abused by each owner); eating children; mass suicide; migration

The DPRK is still Confucian at base; the final grave of the dead is believed to influence a family’s future. Therefore, Chinese border graves are evidence of those who died trying to escape famine.

North Korean Chosun Soren run pachenko parlours in Japan to extract foreign currency.

Eating foraged food is counter productive since the body requires more energy to digest it.

DPRK cattle fell by 37%, pigs 57%, and chickens 90%.

The poor who had trusted in Dear Leader to feed them via the public distribution system (PDS) died of starvation.

V) The Economics of the Famine (pp. 89-121)

The PDS is always tied to politics, and is used to control the people.

The famine broke the social contract and cooperatives began to hide food and farm secret mountain plots.

Each Korean had to wear a pin of KIS, whose design indicated social rank. No one would marry into a lower status.

Black market rice and corn was 17X the state price.

Kim Jong Il (KJI) closed KIS' limited private markets since they made people less dependent on the state.

The North east was always the poorest area of the Korea.

The DPRK only allowed World Food Program support in 1996, most of which went to part cadres.

Farmers withhold produce for speculative purposes, since food becomes more precious than gold.

KJI's response to social breakdown was militarisation of farming; corn guards were sent to fields.

VI) The Diplomacy of the Famine (pp. 122-140)

DPRK diplomacy ensured aid was sufficiently delayed and ineptly delivered so as to have no effect.

In November 1987, North Korea blew up Korean Air Flight 858, killing 115.

Stalin approved the North's invasion of the South, and chose KIS to lead it.

The DPRK preferred to see its people starve than change its policies.

Europe's response to the famine was late, erratic, and short-lived.

VII) The Politics of the Famine: The Battle in Washington (pp. 141-163)

Americans were said to not countenance using famine relief as a diplomacy tool.

VIII) The International Aid Effort (pp. 164-200)

Post-harvest losses under Socialism is high: crops left to rot due to poor logistics networks and inadequate storage. The Soviet Union in the late 1980s ran at 20%.

Aristotle: anything owned in common by everyone is cared for by no one.

Malnutrition naturally reduces AAs and protein formation. The liver is also damaged leading to disease

IX) A Great Famine? (pp. 201-215)

Defector Hwang claimed 2.5M died.

Tuberculosis became epidemic in the 1990s.

X) The Political and Security Consequences of the Famine (pp. 216-235)

Bad harvests in France in 1787-9 caused rising prices and were a catalyst for the Revolution.

XI) What Is to Be Done? (pp. 236-247)

Appendix/Notes (pp. 248-273)

Famine-struck women are less fertile.