

# **Korea and the Global Struggle for Socialism**

## **A Perspective from Anthropological Marxism**

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*Pablo Picasso, Massacre in Korea (1951)*

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## Introduction

Even on the left, the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) is perhaps the most misunderstood country on our Mother Earth. Cuba and Vietnam both enjoy support among wide sectors of the American left, but north Korea is the object of ridicule and scorn among otherwise intelligent people. In order to clear away some of the misunderstanding, we can do no better than quote Gowan's insightful article, "Understanding North Korea."

It's not pleasant to have too little to eat, to be conscripted into the army for an extended period of your life and to be forced to live your whole life under a nuclear sword of Damocles, but these are not conditions north Koreans have freely chosen for themselves. They have been imposed from the outside as punishment for striving for something better than what is offered by colonialism, capitalism and imperialism. Those striving for the same elsewhere, at the very least, owe north Korea some understanding.

It's clear why Che Guevara, and other revolutionaries, considered north Korea of the 60's, 70's and even early 80's, to be an inspiration. Emerging from the womb of the guerilla wars of the 30s, the north had fought two imperialisms. It had won against the Japanese and held the US to a standstill. It was building, in the face of unremitting US hostility, a socialist society that was progressing toward communism. The country offered free health care, free education, virtually free housing, radical land reform and equal rights for women, and its industry was steaming ahead of that of the south. By contrast, the neo-colony Washington had hived off for itself below the 38th parallel was a vast warren of sweatshops reminiscent of England's industrial revolution. People lived harsh, miserable, uncertain lives, in incessant struggle with a military dictatorship backed by the US, bearing an uncomfortable resemblance to Europe's pre-war fascist regimes.

Would Che be inspired by the north Korea of today, an impoverished country that struggles with food scarcity? Probably. What have changed are the circumstances, not the reasons to be inspired. The projects north Korea has set for itself – sovereignty, equality, socialism – have become vastly more difficult, more painful, more daunting to achieve in the face of the void left by the counter-revolution that swept the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and China's breakneck sprint down the capitalist road. Would Che have soured on north Korea, because the adversity it faces has grown tenfold? I doubt it. A revolutionary, it's said, recognizes it is better to die on your feet than live on your knees. North Korea has never lived on its knees. I think Che would have liked that. (Gowans 2006)

## What Is Socialism and Why Is It Important?

In my recent wrap-up of 2012 elections, I stressed that although socialism does not appear to be on the agenda in U.S. politics, it is very much on the global agenda. Here's what I said:

Clearly, workers in the United States have not yet reached a boiling point, but we must keep in mind that the U.S. is only one part of the global capitalist system. The recent re-election of Hugo Chávez of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela reminds us of other socialist heads of state in Nicaragua, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, France, China, North Korea, Laos, Vietnam and, of course Cuban President Raúl Castro. While we may not agree with all the policies of these nations—when have socialists ever agreed about everything?—socialism is clearly not dead. From a global perspective socialism is very much on the agenda. (“Definitely Not a Concession Speech.”)

A comrade objected, noting that it was certain that “either North Korea is not socialist or I am not,” also alluding to the “National Socialism” of the Nazis. Perhaps this is a good opportunity to explain what we mean by socialism. Clearly there is a lot of confusion in the common usage of the term, but that does not mean that we need to be confused. Like capitalism and communism, socialism has a clear, scientific meaning and it is important that this be understood within our movement.

Unfortunately, the distortions of socialism are so widespread and entrenched even among those who consider themselves socialist that clarification of this issue will require some effort. It will also require extensive quotation from the most essential passages of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, so that readers may formulate their own views on the topic. This makes for an unwieldy and difficult essay, but this is unavoidable.

To begin, we may look at the Platform of the Peace and Freedom Party of California, the oldest and largest ballot-qualified socialist party in the United States. Here, we find the following:

The Peace and Freedom Party, founded in 1967, is committed to socialism, democracy, ecology, feminism and racial equality. We represent the working class, those without capital in a capitalist society. We organize toward a world where cooperation replaces competition, a world where all people are well fed, clothed and housed; where all women and men have equal status; where all individuals may freely endeavor to fulfill their own talents and desires; a world of freedom and peace where every community retains its cultural integrity and lives with all others in harmony. We offer this summary of our immediate and long-range goals:

### **Socialism**

We support social ownership and democratic management of industry and natural resources. Under capitalism, the proceeds of labor go to the profits of the wealthy few. With socialism, production is planned to meet human needs.

To us, socialism is workers' democracy, including the principle that all officials are elected, recallable at any time, and none receives more than a worker's wage. Socialism can only be brought about when we, the working class, unite and act as a body in our own interests. Our goals cannot be achieved by electoral means alone. We participate in mass organization and direct action in neighborhoods, workplaces, unions and the armed forces everywhere.

As a Platform statement for a multi-tendency, electoral party, this is fine. However, the statement skirts important issues, especially those dealing with societies that are actually involved in the process of building socialism, such as Cuba and Venezuela. This is probably intentional, since significant differences are to be expected in these areas, and these differences need not be resolved in what is, essentially, a common program of diverse political tendencies. This does not mean, however, that these differences should not be openly discussed and debated, for only through such a process can clarification be reached and a stronger party built, once that truly represent the actual movement.

With this background, let us turn to a scientific view of socialism. The founders of scientific socialism were clear that socialism was not simply an ideal, but an actual potential within existing society:

Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (1845)

The use of the term Communism instead of socialism was intentional, as Engels explains in his 1888 Preface to the English Edition of the Communist Manifesto:

Thus the history of the Manifesto reflects the history of the modern working-class movement; at present, it is doubtless the most wide spread, the most international production of all socialist literature, the common platform acknowledged by millions of working men from Siberia to California.

Yet, when it was written, we could not have called it a socialist manifesto. By Socialists, in 1847, were understood, on the one hand the adherents of the various Utopian systems: Owenites in England, Fourierists in France, [See Charles Owen and François Fourier] both of them already reduced to the position of mere sects, and gradually dying out; on the other hand, the most multifarious social quacks who, by all manner of tinkering, professed to redress, without any danger to capital and profit, all sorts of social grievances, in both cases men outside the working-class movement, and looking rather to the “educated” classes for support. Whatever portion of the working class had become convinced of the insufficiency of mere political revolutions, and had proclaimed the necessity of total social change, called itself Communist. It was a crude, rough-hewn, purely instinctive sort of communism; still, it touched the cardinal point and was powerful enough amongst the working class to produce the Utopian communism of Cabet in France, and of Weitling in Germany. Thus, in 1847, socialism was a middle-class movement, communism a working-class movement. Socialism was, on the Continent at least, “respectable”; communism was the very opposite. And as our notion, from the very beginning, was that “the emancipation of the workers must be the act of the working class itself,” there could be no doubt as to which of the two names we must take. Moreover, we have, ever since, been far from repudiating it. (Engels, “Preface to the 1888 English Edition” of the Communist Manifesto)

Engels is speaking here, of course, of the 1840s, when our Manifesto was written. Already at that time, there were different views about socialism, which our Manifesto discusses in the section on Communist and Socialist Literature. If the authors of the Manifesto were writing today, they would of course deal with what used to be called “really existing socialism” as well as European social democracy, and Hitler’s “National Socialism.” This is a task we must address on our own.

As the working class movement developed, our understanding of socialism developed, in no small part *because* of the Manifesto. In 1880, Engels (with Marx's encouragement and approval) wrote *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, which discussed how socialism was transformed from a utopian vision into a science:

The Utopians' mode of thought has for a long time governed the Socialist ideas of the 19th century, and still governs some of them. . . . To all these, Socialism is the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice, and has only to be discovered to conquer all the world by virtue of its own power. And as an absolute truth is independent of time, space, and of the historical development of man, it is a mere accident when and where it is discovered. With all this, absolute truth, reason, and justice are different with the founder of each different school. And as each one's special kind of absolute truth, reason, and justice is again conditioned by his subjective understanding, his conditions of existence, the measure of his knowledge and his intellectual training, there is no other ending possible in this conflict of absolute truths than that they shall be mutually exclusive of one another. Hence, from this nothing could come but a kind of eclectic, average Socialism, which, as a matter of fact, has up to the present time dominated the minds of most of the socialist workers in France and England. Hence, a mish-mash allowing of the most manifold shades of opinion: a mish-mash of such critical statements, economic theories, pictures of future society by the founders of different sects, as excite a minimum of opposition; a mish-mash which is the more easily brewed the more definite sharp edges of the individual constituents are rubbed down in the stream of debate, like rounded pebbles in a brook.

To make a science of Socialism, it had first to be placed upon a real basis.

After a lengthy discussion of class struggle and the materialist conception of history, Engels continues:

The new facts made imperative a new examination of all past history. Then it was seen that all past history, with the exception of its primitive stages, was the history of class struggles; that these warring classes of society are always the products of the modes of production and of exchange — in a word, of the economic conditions of their time; that the economic structure of society always furnishes the real basis, starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole superstructure of juridical and political institutions as well as of the religious, philosophical, and other ideas of a given historical period. Hegel has freed history from metaphysics — he made it dialectic; but his conception of history was essentially idealistic. But now idealism was driven from its last refuge, the philosophy of history; now a materialistic treatment of history was propounded, and a method found of explaining man's "knowing" by his "being", instead of, as heretofore, his "being" by his "knowing".

From that time forward, Socialism was no longer an accidental discovery of this or that ingenious brain, but the necessary outcome of the struggle between two historically developed classes — the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Its task was no longer to manufacture a system of society as perfect as possible, but to examine the historico-economic succession of events from which these classes and their antagonism had of necessity sprung, and to discover in the economic conditions thus created the means of ending the conflict. But the Socialism of earlier days was as incompatible with this materialist conception as the conception of Nature of the French materialists was with dialectics and modern natural science. The Socialism of earlier days certainly criticized the existing capitalistic mode of production and its consequences. But it could not explain them, and, therefore, could not get the mastery of them. It could only simply reject them as bad. The more strongly this earlier Socialism denounced the exploitations of the working-class,

inevitable under Capitalism, the less able was it clearly to show in what this exploitation consisted and how it arose. but for this it was necessary — to present the capitalistic mode of production in its historical connection and its inevitableness during a particular historical period, and therefore, also, to present its inevitable downfall; and to lay bare its essential character, which was still a secret. This was done by the discovery of surplus-value.

It was shown that the appropriation of unpaid labor is the basis of the capitalist mode of production and of the exploitation of the worker that occurs under it; that even if the capitalist buys the labor power of his laborer at its full value as a commodity on the market, he yet extracts more value from it than he paid for; and that in the ultimate analysis, this surplus-value forms those sums of value from which are heaped up constantly increasing masses of capital in the hands of the possessing classes. The genesis of capitalist production and the production of capital were both explained.

These two great discoveries, the materialistic conception of history and the revelation of the secret of capitalistic production through surplus-value, we owe to Marx. With these discoveries, Socialism became a science. The next thing was to work out all its details and relations.

In Engels view, socialism is no longer a utopian dream to which we believe society *must* conform. Rather, it is a *process* that emerges out of the struggles of a particular class, the proletariat or working class, in a capitalist society. The science of socialism seeks to understand this process and contribute to its unfolding.

Marx made an important contribution to understanding this unfolding of socialism and communism out of capitalism in his work, *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Originally written as a critique of Lassallean and circulated only among about a half-dozen comrades, Engels had it published in 1891 because of its continuing relevance.

Although Marx and Engels saw this primarily as a critique of Lassalleanism, Lenin saw that this “overshadowed its positive part, namely the analysis of the connection between the development of Communism and the withering away of the state.” S&R p. 69

There are two features of the *Critique* that are important for our purposes. First, in making a distinction between the lower and higher phase of Communism, Marx stressed the Communism was not a steady state but rather a process that underwent its own development. Second, Marx noted the importance of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the revolutionary transition between capitalism and communism.

Marx distinguished between the first and higher phase of communist society as follows:

What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges. . . .

But these defects are inevitable in the first phase of communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society. Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby.

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor,

has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly -- only then then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs! (Marx 1875, p. 10)

Utopians frequently focus on Marx's description of the "higher phase of communist society" as an ideal to which socialist societies should conform. Societies that exhibit defects, cannot possibly be socialist, whatever their claims. Utopians thus ignore the real message of this passage, which is that the development of communist society will be a long historical process, in which "defects are inevitable." Thus when the utopians cite the passage as a way of criticizing existing socialist societies, they "substitute the catchword of revolution for revolutionary development," a procedure Marx explicitly rejected as early as 1853:

"The point of view of the minority is dogmatic instead of critical, idealistic instead of materialistic. They regard not the real conditions but a *mere effort of will* as the driving force of the revolution. Whereas we say to the workers: 'You will have to go through 15, 20, 50 years of civil wars and national struggles not only to bring about a change in society but also to change yourselves, and prepare yourselves for the exercise of political power', you say on the contrary: 'Either we seize power at once, or else we might as well just take to our beds.' Whereas we are at pains to show the German workers in particular how rudimentary the development of the German proletariat is, you appeal to the patriotic feelings and the class prejudice of the German artisans, flattering them in the grossest way possible, and this is a more popular method, of course. Just as the word 'people' has been given an aura of sanctity by the democrats, so you have done the same for the word 'proletariat'. Like the democrats you substitute the catchword of revolution for revolutionary development," etc., etc. (Marx 1853)

Marx here explicitly repeats the message of the Manifesto, that the transition to socialism, emerging from the class struggle, will be neither quick or painless, but will involve as much as a half-century of "civil wars and national struggles." As it turns out, it will take longer, but that is scarcely Marx's fault.

During this "prolonged period of birth pangs from capitalist society," the working class will need its own state, the dictatorship of the proletariat

The question then arises: What transformation will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present state functions? This question can only be answered scientifically, and one does not get a flea-hop nearer to the problem by a thousand-fold combination of the word 'people' with the word 'state'.

Between capitalist and communist society there lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*. (Marx 1875) , p. 18).

Marx did give us a scientific analysis of the world's first dictatorship of the proletariat, the Paris Commune of 1871, which Marx supported even though it was not led by socialists ("the majority of the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it be")

(Marx 1881b). The Commune lasted only three months before it was crushed by French troops with the slaughter of 30,000 communards. Marx describes this experience:

The civilization and justice of bourgeois order comes out in its lurid light whenever the slaves and drudges of that order rise against their masters. Then this civilization and justice stand forth as undisguised savagery and lawless revenge. Each new crisis in the class struggle between the appropriator and the producer brings out this fact more glaringly. Even the atrocities of the bourgeois in June 1848 vanish before the infamy of 1871. The self-sacrificing heroism with which the population of Paris – men, women, and children – fought for eight days after the entrance of the Versaillese, reflects as much the grandeur of their cause, as the infernal deeds of the soldiery reflect the innate spirit of that civilization, indeed, the great problem of which is how to get rid of the heaps of corpses it made after the battle was over!

To find a parallel for the conduct of Thiers and his bloodhounds we must go back to the times of Sulla and the two Triumvirates of Rome. The same wholesale slaughter in cold blood; the same disregard, in massacre, of age and sex, the same system of torturing prisoners; the same proscriptions, but this time of a whole class; the same savage hunt after concealed leaders, lest one might escape; the same denunciations of political and private enemies; the same indifference for the butchery of entire strangers to the feud. (Marx, *Civil War in France*, Section titled "The Fall of Paris")

In a Postscript written twenty years later, Engels clearly identified the Paris Commune as the dictatorship of the proletariat:

Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. (Frederick Engels, London, on the 20th anniversary of the Paris Commune, March 18, 1891.)

Opposing those who called for the immediate abolition of the state, Engels was quite clear on the need for a proletarian dictatorship:

Why do the anti-authoritarians not confine themselves to crying out against political authority, the state? All Socialists are agreed that the political state, and with it political authority, will disappear as a result of the coming social revolution, that is, that public functions will lose their political character and will be transformed into the simple administrative functions of watching over the true interests of society. But the anti-authoritarians demand that the political state be abolished at one stroke, even before the social conditions that gave birth to it have been destroyed. They demand that the first act of the social revolution shall be the abolition of authority. Have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution? A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon — authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists. Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeois? Should we not, on the contrary, reproach it for not having used it freely enough? (Engels, *On Authority*, 1872)

In 1918, Lenin put it much more simply: “No revolution is worth anything unless it can defend itself.” (Lenin 1918) Lenin also remarked:

Without resorting to Utopias, Marx waited for the experience of a mass movement to produce the answer to the problem as to the exact forms which this organisation of the proletariat as the ruling class will assume and as to the exact manner in which this organisation of the proletariat will assume and as to the exact manner in which this organisation will be combined with the most complete, most consistent“ establishment democracy.”

The experiment of the Commune, meager as it was, was subjected by Marx to the most careful analysis in his *The Civil War in France*. p S&R p. 36

Lenin did more than simply re-assert the views of Marx and Engels. He advanced the cause of scientific socialism so dramatically that we now call it Marxism-Leninism. The scientific socialism of Marx and Engels was a product of the 19th Century. Leninism may properly be viewed as the scientific socialism of the 20th Century. Other schools of Marxism may *interpret* Marx (and the world) in various ways, but Leninism alone *changed* it.

In his eulogy, “On the Death of Lenin,” Stalin explained Lenin’s world-historic significance:

Scores and indeed hundreds of times in the course of the centuries the labouring people have striven to throw off the oppressors from their backs and to become the masters of their own destiny. But each time, defeated and disgraced, they have been forced to retreat, harbouring in their breasts resentment and humiliation, anger and despair, and lifting up their eyes to an inscrutable heaven where they hoped to find deliverance. The chains of slavery remained intact, or the old chains were replaced by new ones, equally burdensome and degrading. Ours is the only country where the oppressed and downtrodden labouring masses have succeeded in throwing off the rule of the landlords and capitalists and replacing it by the rule of the workers and peasants. You know, comrades, and the whole world now admits it, that this gigantic struggle was led by Comrade Lenin and his Party. The greatness of Lenin lies above all in this, that by creating the Republic of Soviets he gave a practical demonstration to the oppressed masses of the whole world that hope of deliverance is not lost, that the rule of the landlords and capitalists is shortlived, that the kingdom of labour can be created by the efforts of the labouring people themselves, and that the kingdom of labour must be created not in heaven, but on earth. (As quoted, [Cameron 1987:53] (Cameron 1987)

While this does not in itself prove Leninism is correct, it certainly indicates the Leninism must be considered very seriously. On this, we may quote Stalin’s *Fundamentals of Leninism* (pp. 10-11)

What, then, in the last analysis, is Leninism?

Leninism is Marxism of the era of imperialism and the proletarian revolution. To be more exact, Leninism is the theory and tactics of the proletarian revolution in general, the theory and tactics of the dictatorship of the proletariat in particular. Marx and Engels pursued their activities in the pre-revolutionary period, (we have the proletarian revolution in mind), when developed imperialism did not yet exist, in the period of the proletarians’ preparation for revolution, in the period when the proletarian revolution was not yet an immediate practical inevitability. But Lenin, the disciple of Marx and Engels, pursued his activities in the period of developed imperialism, in the period of the unfolding proletarian revolution, when the proletarian revolution had already triumphed in one country, had smashed bourgeois democracy and had ushered in the era of proletarian democracy, the era of the Soviets.

That is why Leninism is the further development of Marxism.

In other words, Leninism is the scientific socialism of the era of imperialism and proletarian revolution, the 20th century.

Here's what Trotsky had to say about the October Revolution

In the year 1917, Russia was passing through the greatest social crisis. One can say with certainty, however, on the basis of all the lessons of history, that had there been no Bolshevik Party, the immeasurable revolutionary energy of the masses would have been fruitlessly spent in sporadic explosions, and the great upheavals would have ended in the severest counterrevolutionary dictatorship. The class struggle is the prime mover of history. It needs a correct program, a firm party, a trustworthy and courageous leadership – not heroes of the drawing room and parliamentary phrases, but revolutionists, ready to go to the very end. This is the major lesson of the October Revolution. (as quoted, (Socialist Organizer 2013)

By the 20th century, capitalism could no longer be viewed as an economic system that existed within various countries at different levels of development. Instead, capitalism had to be understood as a global system within which there were two kinds of nations, the imperialist nations of Europe, North America, and Japan, and the oppressed nations of what is now called the Global South” Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Lenin stressed that “imperialism is the eve of proletarian revolution,” but with this change, the whole conception of revolution and socialism changed accordingly.

No longer could revolution and socialism be seen as the outcome of conditions within one country. Instead, it was the entire global capitalism system that was ripe for revolution, and the revolution would break out, not necessarily where capitalism was more “advanced.” Rather, the chain of imperialism would be broken at its weakest link, which, in 1917, turned out to be Petrograd in the Tsarist Empire. The “Ten Days That Shook the World” in October 1917 sparked a world revolutionary process that took seventy year to contain and even now is still unfolding. Our task is to understand that process.

The initial steps in such understanding were taken by Lenin in *State and Revolution* (1917). Here, Lenin drew heavily on Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Although Marx and Engels saw this primarily as a critique of Lassalleism, Lenin saw that this “overshadowed its positive part, namely the analysis of the connection between the development of Communism and the withering away of the state.” p. 69

In his analysis, Lenin stressed the need for an instrument to prevent the overthrown ruling class from returning to power. This was the dictatorship of the proletariat:

We shall use this machine, or bludgeon, to destroy all exploitation. And when the possibility of exploitation no longer exists anywhere in the world, when there are no longer owners of land and owners of factories, and when there is no longer a situation in which some gorge while others starve, only when the possibility of this no longer exists shall we consign this machine to the scrap-heap. Then there will be no state and no exploitation. Such is the view of our Communist Party. V. I. Lenin. *The State: A Lecture Delivered at the Sverdlov University*. July 11, 1919

Clearly, then, only after imperialism is smashed and global capitalism is ended, can we speak of the full triumph of socialism. In our current world, this will happen only after U.S. imperialism no longer has its nuclear weapons, to armory of chemical and biological

weapons, it's CIA and other espionage apparatus, only then can we expect socialism to be definitely established and the process of the dictatorship of the proletariat can begin to wither away. So those who like to parade utopian dreams would do better to devote themselves to the ending of the U.S. war machine.

Is North Korea a socialist country? The answer, briefly, is yes. But this is not a question that should be approached in a dogmatic manner, for it depends on what we mean by socialism. If by socialism we mean an ideal society of material abundance, complete freedom, democracy, and equality—ideals that of course we all share—then the answer is clearly no. However, this was not the approach of the founders of scientific socialism:

Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence. (Marx and Engels 1845) I.A.5)

If we adopt this Marxian view and see socialism as the process by which global capitalism is transformed into global communism, then the question becomes more problematic and demands further examination.

Of course there is nothing wrong with having a utopian vision of socialism if this helps inspires us to help address the real problems confronting our species. But Marx cautioned us about letting such views “divert us from the struggle of the present”(Marx 1881a). And when our utopian views are used to denigrate and put down the real achievements of our comrades in this struggle, then we need to have a discussion and make our position clear.

The question of socialism is usually approached in an idealistic and mechanistic manner. Only if a nation conforms to our ideal of socialism can it be considered socialist. If it has shortcomings, it is not socialism but must be something else instead. Using the dialectical method of historical materialism, by contrast, we begin with what a given society is in fact, how it is changing, what it was, what it is becoming, and how is it connected to the total flow of human history. Our results are unlikely to satisfy the immature mind, for they are unlikely to be yes or no, but rather yes and no.

In examining the objective position of North Korea or any other nation, we remember the cautionary words of Lenin in his 1920 Preface to *Imperialism*,

In order to depict this objective position one must not take examples or isolated data (in view of the extreme complexity of the phenomena of social life it is always possible to select any number of examples or separate data to prove any proposition), but *all* the data on the *basis* of economic life in *all* the belligerent countries and the whole world. (Lenin 1916)

Applying Lenin's method to North Korea, we understand that possible to provide abundant documentation from the mainstream press to prove that North Korea is a “a rogue-terrorist-communist-Stalinist-totalitarian-Oriental nightmare” with “insane or diabolical” leaders bent on “mass destruction,” truly a charter member of the “axis of evil” (Cumings p. viii). However, a more dialectical approach requires that we look at all the data and place them in world historical context. Given the preponderance of anti-Communist views, even in the American left, it may be difficult to obtain alternative

views of North Korea, but they do exist, as we suggest below in our “Suggstions for Further Study.”

By most accounts, North Korea is not a place where most middle or upper income Americans would want to live, but Koreans have never had the option of living like middle income Americans. Until the end of WWII, they lived under Japanese imperialism. For a few months after the defeat of Japanese imperialism in WWII, they began to create a new social order. Their attempts were cut short within months of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as the U.S. began to impose American-style imperialism. South Korea succumbed and became a neo-colony. North Korea fought to maintain its independence, at a terrible cost. Life for North Koreans is hard, but not as hard as it was under Japanese imperialism, nor as bad as it would be if the American imperialists were to “liberate” it as they did in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Iraq.

It may be true that the socialism of North Korea is not attractive to most American leftists living in the richest imperialist nation on Earth (I include myself here). Americans like to treat North Korea as a joke, but Korea’s history, and the threat posed by American imperialism is no joke. The U.S. has been threatening North Korea with nuclear attack for over fifty years, well before North Korea even thought of acquiring nuclear weapons. In fact, it was precisely these threats that forced the Soviet Union to build its nuclear arsenal, and these continuing threats have persuaded North Korea to build their own nuclear weapons for their own protection.

Some American leftists also like to point to Marx’s description, in *Critique of the Gotha Program*, of the higher phase of communism, when society will raise on its banner, “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs,” as evidence of the inadequacy of North Korea and other socialist nations. They ignore Marx’s caution, also in the *Critique*, that the communism of the future will only emerge “after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society.” Marx stressed the need for a dictatorship of the proletariat in this transition:

The question then arises: What transformation will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present state functions? This question can only be answered scientifically, and one does not get a flea-hop nearer to the problem by a thousand-fold combination of the word 'people' with the word 'state'.

Between capitalist and communist society there lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*. (Marx 1875)

Lenin understood that the revolutionary transformation of capitalism into communism would last an entire epoch:

The transition from capitalism to communism represents an entire historical epoch. Until this epoch has terminated, the exploiters inevitably cherish the hope of restoration, and this hope is converted into attempts at restoration. And after their first serious defeat, the overthrown exploiters—who had not expected their overthrow, never believed it possible, never conceded the thought of it—throw themselves with energy grown tenfold, with furious passion and hatred grown a hundredfold, into the battle for the recovery of the 'paradise' of which they have been deprived, on behalf of their families, who had been leading such a sweet and easy

life and whom now the 'common herd' is condemning to ruin and destitution (or to 'common labour...'). (Stalin, citing Lenin Vol. XXIII, p. 355).

During this period the proletariat must use state power to suppress the old ruling class:

The dictatorship of the proletariat is a most determined and most ruthless war waged by the new class against a more powerful enemy, the bourgeoisie, whose resistance is increased tenfold by its overthrow . . . the dictatorship of the proletariat is a stubborn struggle—bloody and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, educational and administrative—against the forces and traditions of the old society. (Stalin, citing Lenin Vol. X, pp. 60, 84).

Lenin stressed the importance of the dictatorship of the proletariat in crushing attempts at bourgeois restoration:

We shall use this machine, or bludgeon, to destroy all exploitation. And when the possibility of exploitation no longer exists anywhere in the world, when there are no longer owners of land and owners of factories, and when there is no longer a situation in which some gorge while others starve, only when the possibility of this no longer exists shall we consign this machine to the scrap-heap. Then there will be no state and no exploitation. Such is the view of our Communist Party. (V. I. Lenin. The State: A Lecture Delivered at the Sverdlov University. July 11, 1919)

Clearly, then, only after imperialism is smashed and global capitalism is ended, can we speak of the full triumph of socialism. Only after U.S. imperialism no longer has its nuclear weapons, its armory of chemical and biological weapons, its CIA and other overt and covert espionage apparatus, its control over money and banking, only then can we expect socialism to be definitely established and the process of the withering away of the dictatorship of the proletariat can begin. Those who like to parade utopian dreams are not really helping our cause, and might do better devoting their energies to ending the U.S. war machine.

It is important to understand that this period of revolutionary transition between global capitalism and global socialism, although it will exhibit characteristics of both capitalism and socialism, will be different from either capitalism or socialism and must be understood as such. Accordingly, it cannot be judged by bourgeois norms nor by the norms that will emerge in a truly socialist society.

Marx stressed that “defects are inevitable” even in the early phase of communist society itself which will be “in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.” If this is true even after the defeat of the bourgeoisie, how much more true will it be while the bourgeoisie, “with furious passion and hatred grown a hundredfold,” is still using every means to subvert and destroy every attempt to build socialism?

Thus, when we are attempting to understand the efforts to build socialism in the Soviet Union, the Peoples Republic of China, socialist Cuba, or the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea, we must place them in this context. It is a mistake to judge them as if they represented the socialism of the global future.

Like many others on the left, I have been grappling with this issue for many years, and it was only after a long struggle that I came to use the Leninist terminology. Of course, opinions differ on how to interpret Leninism. In 1978, I published an article titled “On Protosocialist States” in which I argued that:

Protosocialist Nations ... emerge as parts of the world imperialist system break away and begin to build a new socialist order. Protosocialist Nations are not yet socialist, however. They have inherited a legacy of backwardness and remain threatened by imperialism. On this basis, the Protosocialist Nations develop new contradictions of their own, contradictions which can only be resolved after the final overthrow of capitalism.  
<http://www.csulb.edu/~eruyle/protosocialism.pdf>

I would certainly write this differently today, most notably in that I've dropped the "Proto-" and adopted the Leninist usage of using the term socialism to refer to the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. My views, however, are still evolving. Let me make the following observations:

It was Lenin who called the Soviet Union socialist. He did this in his first public appearance after the success of the October Revolution, at the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies on October 25, 1917. In John Reed's words:

Now Lenin, gripping the edge of the reading stand, letting his little winking eyes travel over the crowd as he stood there waiting, apparently oblivious to the long-rolling ovation, which lasted several minutes. When it finished, he said simply, "We shall now proceed to construct the Socialist order." Again that overwhelming human roar.

So on October 25, 1917, socialism was no longer just a utopia or even just a scientific concept. Socialism was a reality. Our task, as Marxists, as scientific socialists, and as communists, is to understand that reality, in both its positive and negative aspects.

It was several months before the new Soviet state had a formal name. On July 10, 1918, the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets adopted the 1918 Constitution of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic, which clearly defined the new state as "a free socialist society of all the working people of Russia," and "a dictatorship of the urban and rural proletariat and the poorest peasantry."

In December 1922, the Russia SFSR, the Transcaucasian SFSR, the Ukrainian SSR and the Byelorussian SSR united to form the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. To the best of my knowledge, there was no dispute. All the Old Bolsheviks—Lenin, Stalin, Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, even Trotsky—all agreed that the new Soviet state was socialist.

My views are based on Lenin's scientific concept that sees socialism as an early phase of communist society that exists during the transition from capitalism to communism in which the state takes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat. During this phase, Marx stressed, "defects are inevitable" as the working class gains the experience needed to rule as a class.

Socialism began as a utopia, was transformed into a science through the work of Marx and Engels, but became a reality with Lenin. The first thing Lenin did after the October Revolution was promise the building of the socialist order to thunderous applause from workers and peasants the world over.

In my view, this scientific view of the Soviet Union as socialist did not disarm the working class. The working class and peasantry supported socialism and the Communist Party throughout the Civil War, collectivization and industrialization, and the Nazi

invasion. The Soviet Union could not have survived otherwise. It is true that the Soviet leadership stumbled forty years later, in 1990, and provided an opening for the imperialists to strike a fatal blow, but this does not detract from the real accomplishments of socialism in the seventy years after 1917.

For this reason, I think it is still important to understand the Soviet Union and its accomplishments during this period as socialist. Not in the sense of an ideal to which all societies must conform, but rather in Marx's sense of the real process which abolishes the present state of things: capitalism and imperialism.

What enabled the imperialists to overthrow the Soviet Union, in my view, was, in large part, abandoning the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat and not recognizing the need for continuing this dictatorship until the revolution was made permanent by overthrowing the imperialists in all the leading countries of the world. As Marx put it:

While the democratic petty bourgeois want to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible, achieving at most the aims already mentioned, it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far – not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world – that competition between the proletarians of these countries ceases and at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers. Our concern cannot simply be to modify private property, but to abolish it, not to hush up class antagonisms but to abolish classes, not to improve the existing society but to found a new one. (Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League, London, March 1850)

In other words, as long as U.S. imperialism exists, the Soviet Union had to remain a dictatorship of the proletariat. But Gorbachev and others of his generation, the first generation born after the revolution, believed they no longer had to live under the dictatorship. Why should they have to defend socialism in Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and elsewhere? Let them go, so the Soviet Union can return to a “normal” life, like the “middle classes” have in the West. This seemed reasonable enough at the time but proved fatal.

Following Marx, Lenin understood that the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat would last an entire epoch. Lenin further noted:

The dictatorship of the proletariat is a most determined and most ruthless war waged by the new class against a more powerful enemy, the bourgeoisie, whose resistance is increased tenfold by its overthrow . . . the dictatorship of the proletariat is a stubborn struggle—bloody and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, educational and administrative—against the forces and traditions of the old society. . . . (Stalin, citing Lenin Vol. X, pp. 60, 84).

We shall use this machine, or bludgeon, to destroy all exploitation. And when the possibility of exploitation no longer exists anywhere in the world, when there are no longer owners of land and owners of factories, and when there is no longer a situation in which some gorge while others starve, only when the possibility of this no longer exists shall we consign this machine to the scrap-heap. Then there will be no state and no exploitation. Such is the view

of our Communist Party. (V. I. Lenin. The State: A Lecture Delivered at the Sverdlov University. July 11, 1919)

Following Lenin, Stalin expresses the same idea:

But the overthrow of the power of the bourgeoisie and establishment of the power of the proletariat in one country does not yet mean that the complete victory of socialism has been ensured. After consolidating its power and leading the peasantry in its wake the proletariat of the victorious country can and must build a socialist society. But does this mean that it will thereby achieve the complete and final victory of socialism, i.e., does it mean that with the forces of only one country it can finally consolidate socialism and fully guarantee that country against intervention and, consequently, also against restoration? No, it does not. For this the victory of the revolution in at least several countries is needed. Therefore, the development and support of the revolution in other countries is an essential task of the victorious revolution. Therefore, the revolution which has been victorious in one country must regard itself not as a self-sufficient entity, but as an aid, as a means for hastening the victory of the proletariat in other countries.

Lenin expressed this thought succinctly when he said that the task of the victorious revolution is to do "the utmost possible in one country for the development, support and awakening of the revolution *in all countries*,"

These, in general, are the characteristic features of Lenin's theory of proletarian revolution. (Foundations of Leninism, III, Theory)

The essence of Marx's theory of the state has been mastered only by those who realize that the dictatorship of a single class is necessary not only for every class society in general, not only for the proletariat which has overthrown the bourgeoisie, but also for the entire historical period which separates capitalism from "classless society", from communism. Bourgeois states are most varied in form, but their essence is the same: all these states, whatever their form, in the final analysis are inevitably the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. The transition from capitalism to communism is certainly bound to yield a tremendous abundance and variety of political forms, but the essence will inevitably be the same: the dictatorship of the proletariat. (Lenin, State and Revolution, p. 31)

In other words, until U.S. imperialism is overthrown, attempts to build socialism must remain dictatorships of the proletariat. This includes the present-day socialist societies of China, north Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba. The 1982 Constitution of the People's Republic of China recognizes these important points:

The people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants, which is in essence the dictatorship of the proletariat, has been consolidated and developed. . . .

Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China and the guidance of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, the Chinese people of all nationalities will continue to adhere to the people's democratic dictatorship and follow the socialist road, steadily improve socialist institutions, develop socialist democracy, improve the socialist legal system and work hard and self-reliantly to modernize industry, agriculture, national defence and science and technology step by step to turn China into a socialist country with a high level of culture and democracy. The exploiting classes as such have been eliminated in our country.

However, class struggle will continue to exist within certain limits for a long time to come. The Chinese people must fight against those forces and elements, both at home and abroad, that are hostile to China's socialist system and try to undermine it. . . .

China's achievements in revolution and construction are inseparable from support by the people of the world. The future of China is closely linked with that of the whole world.

China adheres to an independent foreign policy as well as to the five principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence in developing diplomatic relations and economic and cultural exchanges with other countries; (Preamble)

However, the Soviet Union abandoned its earlier recognition of the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In the 1936 Constitution, in which the socialist character of the Soviet Union was re-affirmed, question of the dictatorship of the proletariat was muddled. The Soviet Union was “a socialist state of workers and peasants” which “grew and attained strength as a result of the overthrow of the landlords and capitalists and the achievement of the dictatorship of the proletariat.” It was not clear whether the Soviet Union remained a dictatorship of the proletariat in this 1936 Constitution.

Then, in the 1977 Constitution, the dictatorship of the proletariat was clearly regarded as a thing of the past:

The aims of the dictatorship of the proletariat having been fulfilled, the Soviet state has become a state of the whole people. . . . .

In the USSR a developed socialist society has been built. . . .

The principle applied in the U.S.S.R. is that of socialism: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work."

In abandoning the Marxist-Leninist concept of the necessity of dictatorship of the proletariat throughout the period of the overthrow of imperialism and the transition to Communism, the Soviet leadership opened the door to internal subversion, not only in Eastern Europe, but the Soviet Union itself. This was not, of course, the only reason for the defeat of socialism, but it must be considered.

But questions remain. How is this conception of socialism, growing out of the real experience of the socialist countries, related to the scientific socialism of Engels and to Marx's distinction between “the first phase of communist society” and “a higher phase of communist society.” Also, what are the characteristics of the existing socialist societies in China, Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba, and how are they related to the views of Marx and Engels.

As Marx points out, this is a question that can only be answered scientifically. Marx could not have addressed it, since there were no actual socialist societies to provide actual empirical data about the nature of socialism and its transformations. Now, we have had 95 years of experience with socialism to provide data for a scientific understanding of socialism and its place in the transition to better world.

The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is a harsh concept, but the North Koreans have been faced with harsh alternatives. Rather than comparing conditions of life in North Korea with those in the United States, it might be better to compare them with conditions in Haiti, another nation which, 200 years ago, offended U.S. imperialism with the world's first slave revolution and has been punished for it ever since. Does anyone bother to compare conditions in North Korea with those in Haiti?

We need to understand North Korean society “from within,” as we anthropologists like to say. We shall employ the anthropological method of cultural relativism, which is not so much a ban on making any judgments as a scientific method of temporarily

suspending our own judgments so that we can better understand and make more informed judgments

So, let us begin by quoting one of the foremost historians of Korea, Bruce Cumings:

North Korea has been around for a long time, however, and contrary to media punditry, we know a lot about it- and so does our government. An internal CIA study' almost grudgingly acknowledged various achievements of this regime: compassionate care for children in general and war orphans in particular; "radical change" in the position of women; genuinely free housing, free health care, and preventive medicine; and infant mortality and life expectancy rates comparable to the most advanced countries until the recent famine. A number of other recent books, based on captured North Korean documents or secret materials from the former Soviet Union and China, make this a knowable country, as fascinating as it is repellent, as formidable as it is unique and idiosyncratic.

North Korea does not exist alone, in a vacuum, even if the regime's inveterate solipsism would make you think otherwise. It cannot be understood apart from a terrible fratricidal war that has never ended, the guerrilla struggle against Japanese imperialism in the 1930s, its initial emergence as a state in 1945, its fraught relationship with the South, its brittle and defensive reaction to the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and its interminable daily struggle with the United States of America. On September 8, 1945, U.S. combat troops first occupied Korea; three months later the commander of the Occupation, Gen. John Reed Hodge, "declared war" on the communist party (the one in the southern zone), and in the spring of 1946, he issued his first warning to Washington of an impending North Korean invasion. PREFACE ix

Clearly no idolizer of North Korea, Cumings continues:

North Korea is, above all else, the most astounding garrison state in the world. . . .  
*Why is it a garrison state? Primarily because of the holocaust that the North experienced during the Korean War. . . . We remain technically at war with North Korea. The armistice signed on July 27, 1953, stilled the guns, but it brought no formal peace. Instead the Korean War is one of the longest- running conflicts remaining in the world . . . American troops arrived in southern Korea in September 1945, and 37,000 of them are still there today, long after the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed. More dauntingly war could come again, and very quickly. The Korean population is constantly drilled to prepare for war, indeed for anything—including nuclear attack. pp. 2-3*

So let us look more closely at Korea and its place in the world revolutionary process unleashed by the October Revolution of 1917.

## **U.S. Imperialism in Korea**

### **To the end of WWII**

Up until the 19th Century, Korea and other East Asian countries enjoyed a level of civilization as high or higher than Europe. This changed with the Opium trade and Opium Wars that imposed the unequal treaties on China in the 1840s. Similar treaties were forced on Japan by the U.S. Navy in 1856, and, as Lenin notes: "by their colonial looting of Asian countries the Europeans managed to harden one of them—Japan—for great military exploits that assured it of an independent national development." (as quoted in Baran 1957, p. 161)

The first victim of Japan's great military exploits was Korea, long known as the Hermit Kingdom. The U.S. Navy had attempted the penetration of Korea in 1866, sending the warship General Sherman up the Taedong River toward Pyongyang. This assault was repulsed by a group of Koreans including, it is said, the great grandfather of Kim Il Sung. Another American assault with over 1200 men was repulsed in 1871. Korea was finally opened by the Japanese who forced Korea to sign a treaty in 1875. A treaty with the U.S. soon followed, in 1882, and some American trading ventures opened in Korea. According to the 1882 treaty, both nations promised to come to each others aid in the case of difficulties with another nation, but in 1905, the U.S. signed a secret treaty with Japan giving the Japanese a free hand in Korea in exchange for a free hand in the Philippines.

The Koreans, however, did not accept Japanese rule lightly, and a "righteous army" of guerrillas had to be repressed with the slaughter of over 12,000 Korean patriots in the first year alone. Resistance continued and in 1925 the Korean Communist Party and the Communist-led National Federation of Trade Unions assumed leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle. With the defeat of Japanese in WWII, these forces created a populist People's Republic throughout Korea in September 1945, within weeks of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Although bourgeois historians may regard the Soviet occupation of North Korea as opportunistic power play, the reality is that they entered the war against Japan at the insistence of the United States. At Yalta, the Soviet Union had agreed to enter the war against Japan within three months of the defeat of Nazi Germany. As agreed, on August 8, 1945, exactly three months after the surrender of Germany, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan. The Red Army began to occupy Korea the next morning, stopping at the 38th parallel, accepting the division decided upon by the United States. Kim Il Sung, a Communist active in the anti-Japanese guerilla struggle and who had had served as a Major in the Soviet Red Army along with other Korean patriots, arrived in Korea August 22, 1945. Kim joined the emerging People's Committees, achieving a leadership position by 1948, when he was became Premier of the newly formed Democratic People's Republic of Korea which was formed in the North after the neo-colonial Republic of Korea was established in the South.

### **U.S. Imperialism and Korea (WWII and after)**

For Americans, the Korean War began in 1950 with the invasion of the South by the North. For Koreans, as Bruce Cumings points out, it began in September 1945, with the arrival of U.S. troops in Korea. For Americans, WWII was about fighting for Freedom and against Fascism. From an Asian perspective, the Pacific War and its aftermath was about establishing U.S. neo-colonialism. Nowhere is this more true than in Korea.

Historical research has shown that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was less about ending the war than about letting the Soviet Union and the peoples of the world know that the U.S. had these horrible weapons and was willing to use them in pursuit of its national objectives, most notably fighting its former ally, the Soviet Union. As Winston Churchill told a group of MIT students in 1949: "I must not conceal from you the truth as I see it. It is certain that Europe would have been communized some time ago but for the deterrent of the Atomic Bomb in the hands of the United States."

There are many similarities between the Korean War and the War in Vietnam. Although the Korean War was just as destructive for the Korean as Vietnam was for the Vietnamese, the Korean War occupies a much different place in the consciousness of the American left. For those of us who came of age politically and intellectually during the resistance to the war in Vietnam, Korea is just kind of back there, as a residual category. I was in High School at the time, and my contemporaries wanted to avoid the draft for personal rather than political reasons. As Howard Zinn noted,

The Korean war mobilized liberal opinion behind the war and the President. It created the kind of coalition that was needed to sustain a policy of intervention abroad, militarization of the economy at home. This meant trouble for those who stayed outside the coalition as radical critics. Alonzo Hamby noted (*Beyond the New Deal*) that the Korean war was supported by *The New Republic*, by *The Nation*, and by Henry Wallace (who in 1948 had run against Truman on a left coalition Progressive party ticket). The liberals didn't like Senator Joseph McCarthy (who hunted for Communists everywhere, even among liberals), but the Korean war, as Hamby says, "had given McCarthyism a new lease on life." (p. 420)

It should be noted, however, that some on the left did have a better understanding of the Korean War. Within a few weeks, the Editors of the independent socialist magazine, *Monthly Review*, published a correct analysis, which included their observation that: "The Korean war, if it had remained a civil war, would have been over in a few weeks at most. It is still going only because the United States has chosen to turn it into a war between Koreans and Americans. (*Monthly Review* 1950:106-107)



The Korean War of 1950-53 devastated the Korean people while it enriched the capitalists of America and Japan. The war also established the military-industrial complex as a central institution of American life.

In view of this broad public acceptance of the U.S. rationale for the Korean War, it should be stressed that neither Korea nor Vietnam emanated from Moscow or constituted Communist Aggression, as the mainstream would have us believe. Nor were they really civil wars in which American should not be involved, as some liberals might think. Both

were wars of national liberation against neo-colonial regimes put in place by United States imperialism. The liberation forces, in both cases, were led by Communists: Kim Il Sung in Korea and Ho Chi-minh in Vietnam. Both instituted popular reforms including land reform and popular education and social policies, including women's liberation. Although both Kim and Ho had spent time in the Soviet Union and China and were inspired by the Soviets, neither were following orders or under the control of Moscow or Beijing.

There are many similarities between the wars in Korea and Vietnam. Both were wars of national liberation led by indigenous Communists who had fought against earlier Japanese occupation. Both were horribly destructive for the local people. Both Korea and Vietnam, each, had a greater tonnage of bombs that the total dropped by both sides in WWII. An even greater amount of napalm was used in Korea than Vietnam. Over 50,000 U.S. troops were killed in each, and over 3 million Koreans and 3 million Vietnamese were killed, making them perhaps the most savage wars since WWII. Atrocities were committed by both sides, the Communists as well as the United States and their puppets. My impression is that the atrocities of the imperialists were much greater, but I have not made a systematic study, nor have I consulted Bruce Cumings authoritative 2 volume History of the Korean War on this issue.

Let us review the reality of the Korea War.

When American troops arrived in Korea in September 1945, just weeks after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they found an already existing government of Koreans, by Koreans, and for Koreans. The People's Republic of Korea had been founded on September 6, based on the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence, and the People's Committees rooted in the countryside. On September 14, the PRK issued a twenty-seven point program. The program included:

the confiscation without compensation of lands held by the Japanese and collaborators; free distribution of that land to the peasants; rent limits on the nonredistributed land; nationalization of such major industries as mining, transportation, banking, and communication; state supervision of small and mid-sized companies; ...guaranteed basic human rights and freedoms, including those of speech, press, assembly, and faith; universal suffrage to adults over the age of eighteen; equality for women; labor law reforms including an eight-hour day, a minimum wage, and prohibition of child labor; and "establishment of close relations with the United States, USSR, England, and China, and positive opposition to any foreign influences interfering with the domestic affairs of the state." (Wikipedia, People's Republic of Korea)

This was unacceptable to American Occupation forces, headed by General John R. Hodge, who banned the People's Republic of Korea, restored the old Japanese authorities to power, and dismantled the popular organizations. The objectives of the U.S. occupations forces in Korea were well stated by General Hodge in a letter to William Randolph Hearst (which he didn't mail):

The fight against Communism is an all-American fight here and elsewhere. As the U.S. commander in Korea, I have been heartily engaged in that fight since September 8, 1945, not only fighting against Kremlin Communism and its propaganda supplied directly from the Soviet North Korean Occupation Forces but handicapped by a lot of false and misleading information put out by the Communist, pink, and idealist liberal press of the United States.

When we arrived here, South Korea was in control of Kremlin Communists. . . . we are now eliminating the danger of control through educating the people to its dangers and cracking down on illegal activities. (as quoted by Deane, p. 19-20)

In contrast to the hostility of U.S. occupation forces, the Soviet Union quickly recognized the People's Republic of Korea and supported its revolutionary goals. Although the Koreans were not enthusiastic about Soviet troops on their soil, there was no resistance comparable to the uprisings in South Korea, such as on Cheju Island and Yesu, where thousands were killed and more imprisoned by the South Korean and American forces.

Korean-wide elections planned for 1948 never materialized. Instead, separate elections were held in the South and the North, leading to the establishment of the neo-colonial Republic of Korea in the South in August 1948 and the communist People's Democratic Republic of Korea in the North in September 1948. Soviet troops left in 1948 and U.S. troops in 1949, though many advisors remained.

Skirmishes along the artificial border at the 38th parallel never really stopped, leading to a full-scale assault by North Korea troops on June 25, 1950. The Korean War had officially begun.

The first phase of the Korean War was the North Korean offensive which began on June 25 and captured Seoul in three days, encountering no popular resistance and little resistance from the South Korean military (McArthur complained that they "melted like butter"). By mid-September, U.S. and South Korean forces had been pushed to the Pusan perimeter, at the extreme southeast of the Korean peninsula.

The U.S. counterattack began on September 15, 1950 and by the end of November had advanced to the Chinese border, not stopping at the 38th parallel in spite of Chinese warnings. This provoked a Chinese offensive on November 25, 1950

The Chinese pushed the imperialist forces south, beyond Seoul, but then were themselves pushed back to the vicinity of the original starting line, approximately the 38th parallel, where the fighting stabilized by mid-1951. An armistice was signed in 1953, but no peace treaty has yet been signed, and approximately 38,000 U.S. troops remained stationed in Korea. Skirmishes along the border continue to the present. Although some say the U.S. and North Korea are still at war, the reality is that the United States did not declare war on North Korea—which would require an act of Congress—or any of the other nations it has invaded since WWII.

The Korean War was one of the most destructive in human history. Nearly 4 million Koreans died throughout the peninsula, two-thirds of them civilians. China lost up to 1 million soldiers, and the US suffered 36,934 dead and 103,284 wounded. In the North, it is said that no buildings over one story high were left standing and people were living in caves.

### **After the Korean War**

With the armistice, North Korea began to rebuild, and by the mid-1960s had transformed itself into what Che Guevara considered a model socialist state. The English Keynesian economist Joan Robinson wrote an article, "Korean Miracle," for Monthly

Review and, referring to the achievements of North Korea, stated that: “All the economic miracles of the postwar world are put in the shade by these achievements.”

As Cumings writes

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) evolved into a singular and puzzling nation that resists easy description. Because its leadership is secretive and unyielding to foreign attentions, many basic facts about the country are unknown. Onto this inkblot pundits are therefore able to project equally unyielding stereotypes (a Stalinist attempt at re-creating “1984,” a renegade state, a socialist basket case, a Confucian/communist monarchy, Joan Robinson’s economic miracle, Che Guevara’s idea of what Cuba should eventually look like). In the night of our ignorance, North Korea confirms all stereotypes. But closer familiarity confounds simple expectations.

During a visit in 1987 with members of a British film crew, I learned that they expected Pyongyang to be something like Teheran in the 1980s, where they had also filmed a documentary: the State Department called this a “terrorist” nation like Iran, and so they assumed that cars filled with “revolutionary guards” would be careening through the streets, machine guns dangling out the windows. (They had put in for and received the equivalent of combat pay from their employer.) Or they thought it would be a poorer version of China, the masses pedaling to work on bicycles, clad in drab blue work clothes. They dreaded that creature comforts could only be harder to find there than in Moscow, where they had recently suffered.

They were ill prepared for the wide tree-lined boulevards of P’yongyang, swept squeaky clean and traversed by determined, disciplined urban commuters held in close check by traffic women in tight uniforms, pirouetting with military discipline and a smile, atop platforms at each intersection. They had not expected a population living in modern high-rise buildings, hustling out in the morning like Japan’s “salarymen” to a waiting subway or electric bus. They were suddenly enamored of the polite waitresses who served ample portions of tasty Korean and Western food at hotels and restaurants.

In the 1980s P’yongyang was one of the most efficient, best-run cities in Asia, a mixture of the fastidiousness of Singapore and the bucolic quiet of Alma-Ata. Older utilitarian Soviet-style apartment houses and state office buildings mingled with grand new monumental architecture, lavished with marble and topped off with traditional Korean curved roofs. About two million people lived there, or 10 percent of the population. If the pickings were predictably slim among consumer goods, daily necessities were available and the traveler observed few queues (although resident diplomats said there were many lines for services). Well-tended parks dotted all sections of the city, through which two rivers flowed along willow-lined banks.

Smaller cities were less pleasing; many were unrelievedly ugly in their mimicry of Soviet proletarian architecture, the apartments all stamped from the same mold, sitting askew along jolting, potholed roads. But then, most of them had been built since the Korean War (1950-53), when nearly every urban building of note was razed by American bombing. And always there was color, whether affixed self-consciously to storefronts and apartment balconies or leaping out from the ever-present political billboards.

North Korean villages were spartan, plain, clean, and evocative of the rustic atmosphere of the Korean past so lacking in the capital. They were linked by a network of hard-pack dirt roads, whereas cities are connected by extensive railways. Residents planted vegetables raised for home consumption or the small private market on every square meter of land, right

up to the edge of streets; electric wires ran to all peasant homes, but television aerials were much less apparent than in the cities.

As in South Korea, thatched roofs had given way to tile, signifying modernity (shortly before he died Kim Il Sung claimed that North Korea had realized the age-old dream of having everyone live in a tiled-roof home); so did the rice paddies, which no longer gave off the peculiar odor of human manure, because of the widespread use of chemical fertilizer. Signs urged self-reliance (“regeneration through one’s own efforts”) on the locals, no doubt a reflection of state priorities, which emphasized heavy industry, military preparedness, and the city.

In city, town, and village there was Kim Il Sung; everywhere there was Kim Il Sung, staring down from a billboard or in the subway or on the apartment wall: offering here a maxim for industry, there one for agriculture (“rice is communism”), or simply averring (in the National Folk Museum) that “Koreans can hardly be Korean if they don’t eat toenjang” (fermented bean paste). The regime announced that the orchid *Kimilsungia* was blossoming around the country. (FN: *Kimilsungia* is an orchid developed by an Indonesian botanist and given to Kim by Sukarno in Jakarta in 1965. In all his modesty Kim resisted having a flower named for him, regime scribes say, but the Korean people demanded it out of respect for their leader.) In utterly predictable DPRK fashion, there was also *Kimjongilia*, a new begonia brought forth by state-controlled florists? No leader in the twentieth century stamped a nation with his presence more than did Kim: born on the day the Titanic sank (April 15, 1912), in power for nearly five decades, he died of a heart attack on July 8, 1994—sending his kingdom into a state of shock.

Few police and military were visible to the traveler, in this, the most militarized country on the face of the earth. The one-won note was a tip-off, however, showing on its face a woman in bright traditional dress leaping forward with a pistol in her hand. This is a garrison state with one in twenty citizens in the military, compulsory military service for everyone, an army one million strong, millions more in militias, enormous military bases and arsenals built deep underground, subterranean subway stations with gigantic blast doors recessed into the walls, round-the-clock vigils for trouble along the DMZ, a dictator who sleeps in a different place every night for security reasons, and twenty-two million citizens each with a personal reliability rating.

In the late 1940s, as we have seen, the regime emerged within the bowels of Russian Red Army occupation and thus took its administrative and industrial structure from Soviet models (as did every socialist state in the period). The DPRK was proclaimed on September 9, 1948, but much of it was in place within a year after Japan’s colonial rule ended in 1945, and many of the themes visible then remain features of the regime today. Above all this is a postcolonial state, still fighting the Japanese.

Hardly a day goes by when the controlled press does not rant on about a fifty-year-old Japanese atrocity, or warn about the imminent revanche of Japanese militarism. The resistance to Japanese imperialism is still so prominent that one would think the war had just ended; many signs exhort citizens to “live in the way of the anti-Japanese guerrillas,” and young people go on camping trips that retrace their struggles. Kim’s Korean guerrilla comrades structured the core or commanding heights of the regime, and now as they pass on their images remain for the ages in a stunning cemetery atop T’aesong Mountain, overlooking P’yŏngyang, each person’s exploits memorialized with a stone and a life-size bronze bust.

The unique symbol/logo of the Korean Workers Party (KWP) places a writing brush across the hammer and sickle, indicating an inclusive policy toward the educated and the expert:

Kim rarely if ever denigrated them, in contrast to Maoist China, and explicitly authorized their wide-spread introduction into positions of authority-scholar-officials, communist-style. The Koreans also established a vague category, *sarnuwén*, meaning clerks, small traders, bureaucrats, professors, and the like. This category served two purposes: for the regime it retained educated people and experts who might otherwise have fled south; for large numbers of Koreans it provided a category within which to hide “bad” class background.

Thus the Korean revolution, after polarizing the population into good and bad classes at its inception, soon pursued an inclusive, all-encompassing mass politics. The Koreans have envisioned their society as a mass, the gathered-together “people,” rather than a class-based and class-divided society. The union of the three classes—peasant, worker, *samuwdn*—excluded few but the landlords of the old period, who, after all, were much stronger in southern than in northern Korea. Probably the key factors explaining this would be the relatively industrialized character of the North, an inheritance from the heavy Japanese investment there, the opportunity for many capitalists and landlords to flee to the South, and chronic labor shortages, especially among skilled experts.

The Koreans also adapted typical postcolonial Third World policies to their indigenous political culture and to Soviet-style socialism: an economic program of rapid industrialization and a philosophy of subjecting nature to human will. They combined Lenin’s program of national liberation and Stalin’s autarky of socialism in one country (to become in Korea socialism in one-half a country and, now, as one wit remarked, socialism in one family). Autarky fit Korea’s Hermit Kingdom past and answered the need for closure from the world economy after decades of opening under Japanese imperial auspices. (Cumings 2005, pp. 404-407)

Going into the 1980s, North Korea did indeed appear as a model for socialism, and compared very favorably with that of South Korea in term of economic development and general living conditions. During the course of the 1980s, however, South Korea began to surge ahead with massive assistance from the United States.

During the 1990s, North Korea suffered from a number of devastating shocks. In 1991, the Soviet Union was overthrown and North Korea lost an important trading partner. In 1994, Kim Il Sung died, followed by a series of floods and droughts, leading to famine. As Cumings writes:

Since the death of Kim Il Sung, the North has faced one terrible crisis after another. It was visited with two years of unprecedented floods (in 1995 and 1996), a near-collapse of its energy system (which then caused many factories to close), a summer of drought (1997), and a resulting famine that claimed the lives of more than half a million people. This is a textbook example of the calamities that are supposed to mark the end of the Confucian dynastic cycle, and North Korean citizens must wonder how much more suffering they will endure before the economy returns to anything like the relatively stable situation that foreigners like myself observed in the 1980s. Kim Jong Il waited out the three-year traditional mourning period for the first son of the king before assuming his father’s leadership of the ruling party; on the fiftieth anniversary of the regime’s founding, in September 1998, he became the maximum leader, but chose not to become head of state (that is, president of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea)—probably because he appears to be uncomfortable in meeting foreign leaders. Kim Jong Il assumed the mandate of heaven (a term that the North Koreans used repeatedly after Kim Il Sung died) with the regime’s future shaky and with his people still starving.

The situation now is by no means as harsh as it was in the 1990s, but it is difficult to find sources that address the question of contemporary living conditions in anything but an impressionistic manner.

## **Defects in Building Socialism in Korea**

It is important to deal openly with the features of North Korea that American liberals—even some who consider themselves socialist—find most offensive about the PDRK. These are serious issues and need to be dealt with openly and frankly, avoiding dogmatism and sectarianism in favor of open discussion and debate.

Readers may want to look more closely at the ISO article, “Socialism in One Dynasty,” which is more a criticism of other U.S. socialist organizations—the Workers World Party (WWP), the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL), and the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO)—than a criticism of the PDRK, and so we shall not discuss it directly here, other than to note that my own work is closer to the latter three organizations than ISO.

Their attitudes toward North Korea tell us a great deal about what socialism means to the WWP, PSL and FRSO. We can be absolutely clear in stating this: The defense of the North Korean regime as socialist is at odds with the genuine socialist tradition, and its commitment, above all, to equality, mass democracy and working class power. THERE ARE, after all, clues that North Korea isn't socialist, which people who claim to have read Marx and Engels could have picked up on.

With this introduction, let us look more closely at what seem to be the major areas that folks are likely to find most problematic: 1. Nuclear Weapons, 2. Prisons and Political Repression, Inequality, and 3. Inequality, Poverty and Starvation and 4. the role of the Kim family.

### **1. Nuclear weapons**

I was a sympathetic participant/observer of the no nukes movement of the 1980s, and I have always agreed with Patrick Moore’s harsh judgment, that nuclear weapons and nuclear power plants are “the most dangerous devices that man has ever created. Their construction and proliferation is the most irresponsible, in fact the most criminal, act ever to have taken place on this planet.” (1976) I also believe that it is my own government—and therefore every American—that must bear primary responsibility for this continuing threat to human life and well being. The U.S. government could end this madness within a few years but refuses to do so. The development of nuclear weapons by first, the Soviet Union, then China, and now North Korea must be placed in this context. I am saddened by their decisions, but cannot fault them. I agree with Michael Parenti’s carefully reasoned approach:

After years of encirclement and repeated rebuffs from Washington, years of threat, isolation, and demonization, the Pyongyang leaders are convinced that the best way to resist superpower attack and domination is by developing a nuclear arsenal. It does not really sound so crazy. As already mentioned, the United States does not invade countries that are armed with long-range nuclear missiles (at least not thus far).

Having been pushed to the brink for so long, the North Koreans are now taking a gamble, upping the ante, pursuing an arguably "sane" deterrence policy in the otherwise insane world configured by an overweening and voracious empire.

Bruce Cumings expressed a similar thought:

If we assume that P'yongyang's real goal was to build weapons, it had solid justification for going nuclear: after all, it could easily argue that it was merely engaged in deterrence. In following as much press and television coverage as I could from 1991 to 1994, I saw not one mainstream article or broadcast that explored what P'yongyang constantly spoke of -- namely, that North Korea had been the target of periodic nuclear threats and ongoing nuclear deterrence from the United States for decades. (Cumings 1997)

North Korea openly withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003, and so is not, strictly speaking, in violation of the treaty. Several other nations that did not sign the treaty—Israel, India, Pakistan, and South Africa—developed their own nuclear weapons. South Africa subsequently dismantled their weapons and ratified the NPT.

Although the U.S. was one of the original signatories of the NPT, it openly flouts the treaty's provisions, most notably Article VI: "Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament." The term "in good faith" has a legal meaning that precludes continuing to develop nuclear weapons and threatening their use as the U.S. has repeatedly done since the signing of NPT.

As I have argued elsewhere, both nuclear weapons and nuclear power plants could be eliminated by the year 2020 if the United States would pursue its moral and treaty obligations. Until it does so, its pressure on North Korea and other nations is just a continuation of the "atomic diplomacy" it has pursued since 1945.

## **2. Prisons and Political Repression**

Every nation in the world has a prison system and political repression, and North Korea is no exception. Here's what Bruce Cumings has to say, in a section titled "A Gulag the Size of Greenwich:"

"Kim Jong Il's got a gulag the size of Houston!" George Bush exclaimed. I wonder if the forty-third president consulted an atlas before this particular outburst. Houston has about two million people, four million if you count its suburban sprawl. North Korea has about 23 million people, and its prison camps hold between 100,000 and 150,000, something over half of whom are political cases. But Kim Jong Il does have a gulag. One of his favorite threats is to send his enemies off to it, according to Li Nam Ok, or to labor in the endless number of primitive mines in the country.

Officially Kim Jon Il's gulag is made up of "educational institutions" that do not punish prisoners, but reeducate them. Common criminals who commit minor felonies and small fry with an incorrect grasp of their place in the family state who commit low-level political offenses go off to labor camps or mines for hard work and varying lengths of incarceration; murderers, repeat offenders, and big-time political criminals (particularly those who spy for the South) are incarcerated for good in some of the most godforsaken prisons in the world.

(Cumings goes on to describe the experience of Kang Choi-wan, who was imprisoned at age nine with his family.) Kang Chol-wan was held in the Yodok labor camp for ten years, and like most other prisoners, he went there with his family—a common practice and an odd aspect of the DPRK’s belief in the family as the core unit of society. Mutual family support is also the reason that many survive the ordeal of prison. (There follows a lengthy description of the harsh conditions in the prison system.) When they returned to society, the Kang family initially felt ostracized, but because “most North Koreans share an exceptional innocence and honesty,” soon they were accepted back into the community. The family prospered mainly because of cash coming in from relatives in Japan; a color TV paid for a residence permit in a city near Pyongyang, and soon they were living in the capital, and living well-aided by bribes here and there. ... Kang succeeded in getting into college, but soon tired of it and made his way to China, where he defected. (Kang described his experience in a book, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* which he co-authored with Pierre Rigoulot, a contributor to the notoriously unreliable *Black Book of Communism*.)

The *Aquariums of Pyongyang* is an interesting and believable story, precisely because it does not, on the whole, make for the ghastly tale of totalitarian repression that its original publishers in France meant it to be; instead it suggests that a decade’s incarceration with one’s immediate family was survivable and not necessarily an obstacle to entering the elite status of residence in Pyongyang and entrance to college. Meanwhile we have a long-standing, never-ending gulag full of black men in our prisons, incarcerating upward of 25 percent of all black youths. This doesn’t excuse North Korea’s police state, but perhaps it suggests that Americans should do something about the pathologies of our inner cities—say, in Houston—before pointing the finger. (Cumings 2004, pp. 174-176)

Kang and Rigoulet’s book, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, is representative of an entire genre of exposés and horror stories coming out of North Korea and other socialist nations. Despite such horrific examples, there is really no firm evidence that political repression is greater or the prison system worse in North Korea than in South Korea, or in the United States, or in the imperialist world generally. One could write similar exposés about Attica, Pelican Bay, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, or any number of other prison systems.

According to the International Centre for Prison Studies, the United States has the world’s largest prison system, with 2,193,798 people in prison, a rate of 737 per 100,000 of the population. China has the second largest, with 1,548,498, an incarceration rate of 118. Russia is third, with 874,161, and an incarceration rate of 615, the second highest in the world (BBC News). South Korea is listed as having a prison population of 44,000, with an incarceration rate of 92. No figures are given for North Korea, but it is noted that: “The South Korean National Human Rights Commission has estimated that about 200,000 prisoners are held in prison camps. Amnesty International also estimates such a figure. South Korean Government sources have suggested a total of about 150,000.” This would give North Korea an incarceration rate comparable to the United States, and so skepticism is appropriate. Another source gives the racial composition of America’s prisoners:

The national incarceration rate for whites is 412 per 100,000 residents, compared to 2,290 for African Americans, and 742 for Hispanics.<sup>9</sup> These figures mean that 2.3% of all African Americans are incarcerated, compared to 0.4% of whites and 0.7% of Hispanics.

While these overall rates of incarceration are all at record highs, they fail to reflect the concentrated impact of incarceration among young African American males in particular, many of whom reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods. One in nine (11.7%) African American males between the ages of 25 and 29 is currently incarcerated in a prison or jail.  
p. 4

These figures give an incarceration rate of young African American males, aged 25-29, a truly mind-boggling incarceration rate of 11,700 per 100,000! Little wonder that America's prison system is known as the new Jim Crow.

It needs to be stressed that the prison system is not simply to intimidate and repress the North Korean people, as is implied by the critics. Unlike the U.S., where we really have no enemies that are seeking to invade and destroy us, North Korea faces a very real threat, not only of military attack, including nuclear weapons, but also espionage. John Feffer, co-director of Foreign Policy In Focus, describes the situation in an article, "Spying on the North:"

It started out as a routine briefing at a conference in Florida on U.S. special operations. One of the panelists, Army Brigadier General Neil Tolley, was talking about the importance of human intelligence in North Korea. A reporter, David Axe, dutifully wrote down Tolley's comments and published his article in late May in *The Diplomat*, a foreign policy publication based in Tokyo. The article, quoting Tolley, claimed that U.S. Special Forces were already gathering human intelligence in North Korea.

"U.S. Special Forces have been parachuting into North Korea to spy on Pyongyang's extensive network of underground military facilities," wrote Axe. "That surprising disclosure, by a top U.S. commando officer, is a reminder of America's continuing involvement in the 'cold war' on the Korean peninsula — and of North Korea's extensive preparations for the conflict to turn hot."

According to a National Assembly report, more than 13,000 agents worked on intelligence-gathering in the North. By 1972, more than 7,000 were casualties of the program: 300 confirmed dead, 4,849 missing in action, 203 injured, 130 captured, and more than 2,000 agents assigned to a mysterious "etc" category.

The infiltration program reportedly ended in the 1980s though training continued until the 1990s.

So, yes, the notion of going to extreme lengths to collect human intelligence and conduct operations in North Korea itself is not so far-fetched. According to the Pentagon's Operational Plan 5020, made public in 2003, U.S. commanders were to prepare for conflict with the North by conducting maneuvers around the country's borders and "sow confusion" within the North Korean military. From the Pentagon's perspective, it is not only useful to try to insert spies into North Korea but to have North Korea believe that spies are constantly in its midst.

In view of this sort of espionage, North Korea's system of control makes a lot of sense, for it does indeed hamper U.S. and South Korean efforts to gather vital information to facilitate their attack. This point was made in an article, "'Hard Target' North Korea Poses Challenge to U.S. Spying," John Wolcott writes:

A simple fact is at the heart of the intelligence challenge posed by North Korea, David S. Maxwell, the associate director of the Security Studies program at Georgetown University in

Washington, said in an interview. “What makes it hard for us to penetrate is the same control of information that keeps the regime in power,” he said.

North Korea relies on an 11-year-old network of underground fiber-optic cables that’s harder for outsiders to tap -- and easier for the authorities to monitor -- than are cell phones, satellite communications or the Internet.

Recruiting spies and extracting human intelligence from North Korea is even more difficult, in part because there is no U.S. embassy in Pyongyang to provide cover for U.S. intelligence officers. (Wolcott 2011)

One has to assume that the North Koreans are aware of the role that “human rights” and “pro-democracy” groups, along with other forms of espionage, played in the overthrow of socialism in East Europe and Yugoslavia and are determined not to let this happen to them.

Anyone who is sincerely concerned about political repression in North Korea and other socialist nations would help the situation far more by working to stop U.S. attempts at subversion than by protesting alleged human rights abuses.

We do not have to go to North Korea to find human rights violations. In an article titled “Hell on Earth,” the North Korean newspaper Rodong Sinmun commented on the recent shootings in Newtown, Connecticut:

America's rulers like to call brightly illuminated streets and skyscrapers standing in a row "civilization." But in the quiet corners of its small towns, what governs is the law of the jungle.

The U.S. authorities had better stop taking issue with the human rights situation in other countries and deal with the tragic reality of gun culture and the suffering caused by ceaseless murder in their own country. (2013)

I found this article on a site called WorldMeets.US, which bills itself as “Allowing the Rest of the World to Speak Directly to Americans - Promoting Peace, Diplomacy and Cross-Cultural Understanding.” However, underneath a photo of several North Korean officials, it editorialized: “Kim Jong-un and gang: Given the concentration camp style country they currently rule, can complaints by Pyongyang leader about U.S. human rights abuse be taken seriously?”

Earlier, in an article titled “America is by Far World’s Leading Human Rights Abuser,” the Rodong Sinmun observed that:

U.S. authorities are brutally suppressing people participating in Occupy Wall Street demonstrations across the country, vividly showing the reality of the barrenness of U.S. human rights policy.

Law enforcement authorities responsible for protecting the rights of U.S. citizens are becoming notorious for being the chief culprits of violence and human rights abuse.

American prisons have turned into medieval torture chambers – literal hells on earth.

The right to food, clothing and housing - the most elementary of all human rights, are mercilessly suppressed in a society where the law of the jungle reigns and money is everything.

According to a U.S. Census Bureau survey, as of the end of 2011, the number of the people living in poverty across the country reached 49.1 million. The number of people rendered homeless because of unaffordable high-interest mortgages reached 636,000 last year. It is said that more than 51,000 people in Los Angeles sleep under the open sky every day. The California municipality is now known as the "city of the homeless."

The number of the unemployed in April this year stood at 12.5 million, thanks to the ever-deepening economic crisis. Among them, 5.1 million are long-term unemployed.

According to a report released by the FBI on Sept. 19, 2011, more than a million crimes of violence were committed in the U.S. in 2010.

The "equality for all" much touted by the U.S. is nothing but a deceptive slogan. Every kind of discrimination so wantonly pursued by U.S. authorities mercilessly trampling equality of the people.

Furthermore, the consequences of America's deeply-rooted racial discrimination regularly and vividly manifest in the fabric of everyday life.

Women and children in the country are withering in the mire of social evil. The unending violence against women fully betrays how a barbaric American society is facing the end of an era.

The number of the poor children across the country is over 15 million. And every year, the number of such children subject to violence is over three million, counting only those cases in which a formally complaint was registered.

U.S. human rights abuses also affect other parts of the world, resulting in immeasurable pain and suffering on other nations.

The U.S.-led "war on terror," which has lasted over a decade so far, is an unprecedented exercise in state-sponsored terrorism and human rights abuse. In the wake of Afghanistan and Iraq, the "anti-terror war" now engulfing Pakistan is a clear reflection of this. The so-called "war on terror" has become a war of genocide, taking the lives of countless innocent civilians.

The U.S. is also torturing and abusing prisoners at secret prisons abroad. This is a wanton violation of international human rights and humanitarian law.

The U.S. has also cruelly trampled on the freedom of religion and faith in other nations.

It never ceases to resort to moves designed to bring down governments and terrorize democratically-elected figures from various countries. This constitutes yet another set of wanton violations of national rights sovereignty and humanitarian law.

Furthermore, over the years, the United States has organized and financially backed more than 40 terrorist groups. Some of these, specializing in subversive acts and murder, exerted themselves to stifle the Cuban revolution.

One might argue that the flagrant human rights abuses of the United States, at home and abroad, do not excuse the abuses of the DPRK. While this may seem reasonable, we must remember that North Korea has been a primary target of U.S. war crimes since 1945. How else can the Koreans protect themselves from the most powerful imperialist nation in history?

The violence of oppressed people seeking their liberation may, from a superficial standpoint, look the same as the violence the oppressor uses to maintain his wealth,

privileges, and power over the oppressed, but their inner significance, from both moral and sociological perspectives, are quite different. This is understood by leading pacifists and liberation theologians, but many “Marxists” have failed to grasp this vital point.

### **3. Inequality, Poverty and Starvation**

Inequality exists in all societies, and Marx stressed that inequality would continue for a considerable period even in the communist future. We do expect that socialism should reduce inequality and poverty and eliminate starvation and the worst extremes of inequality. As we have noted, there is considerable testimony that North Korea had made considerable progress in this regard by the 1980s, but that the situation deteriorated after the overthrow of the Soviet Union.

This, however, is not widely appreciated, even by some who should know better.

THERE ARE, after all, clues that North Korea isn't socialist, which people who claim to have read Marx and Engels could have picked up on.

Take the inequality, for example. The weekly bar tab of the "Dear Leader" was reputed to be many times higher than the average North Korean's yearly income. Even discounting the exaggerations you'd expect from a hostile Western press, no one really disputes that the Kim family spared itself no creature comforts.

Rather than basing their views on the gossip pages, the ISO might have consulted the CIA on inequality in North Korea. Helen-Louise Hunter, a CIA analyst who is certainly no advocate of North Korea, provides abundant information on the general egalitarianism of North Korea. Here's what Cumings has to say about what her work reveals:

Hunter's work has some excellent information on arcane and difficult to research subjects like North Korean wage and price structures, the self-sufficient and decentralized neighborhood living practices that mostly eliminated the long lines for goods that characterized Soviet-style communism, and the decade of one's young life that almost every North Korean male is required to devote to military service in this garrison state. She points out many achievements of the North Korean system, in ways that would get anyone outside the CIA labeled a sympathizer—compassionate care for war orphans in particular and children in general, “radical change” in the position of women (“there are now more college-educated women than college-educated men”), genuinely free housing, preventive medicine on a national scale accomplished to a comparatively high standard, infant mortality and life expectancy rates comparable to the most advanced countries until the recent famine, “no organized prostitution,” and “the police are difficult, if not impossible, to bribe.” The author frequently acknowledges that the vast majority of Koreans do in fact revere Kim Il Sung, even the defectors from the system whose information forms the core evidence for her book. According to Prince Norodom Sihanouk, a close friend of Kim's who frequently stayed for months at a time in the North, “Kim ha[d] a relationship with his people that every other leader in the world would envy”; he described it as “much closer” than his own with the Cambodian people (where he is both venerated and highly popular).

American cheerleaders for the South never tire of saying that its GNP is ten times larger than North Korea's; certainly it is much larger, but if, say, the World Bank were to value goods and services in the North in terms of what the equivalents would cost in the United States, as it did for China after it opened up, the North's GNP would mushroom overnight. In Hunter's account of the DPRK when its economy was still reasonably good, about twenty years ago, she found that daily necessities were very low priced, luxuries vastly overpriced. Rents were so nominal that most housing was effectively free, as was health care, and “the government

subsidizes the low prices of rice, sugar, and other food necessities, as well as student uniforms and work clothes.” All homes in the country had electricity by 1968, far ahead of where the South was at the time. To take a measure close to home, she estimates that a husband and wife who were both university professors would be able to save about 50 percent of their monthly salaries. Rice and corn, the major staples, were rationed by the state, as were cooking oils, meat, soy sauce, bean curd, and kimch’i. Other things—fruits, vegetables, nuts, noodles, beer—could be purchased at low prices, with meats and luxury foods overvalued. The general egalitarianism of the society was remarkable, in her view, even if the elite lived much better than the mass. (2004, pp. 194-196)

A few years ago I was standing in front of the original Rosetta stone at the British Museum. Behind me two Koreans were chatting, with one of them pointing out that all three archaic languages depicted on this stone were in fact derivatives of the original mother tongue of humanity—Korean. There is more insight in this anecdote about the absurd and grandiose claims made about all kinds of things in both Koreas than there is in Hunter’s “cult society” thesis. (Cumings 2004, pp. 196-197)

Hunter’s book, *Kim Il-Sung’s North Korea* is a challenging book, for it expresses a view of the DPRK as an Orwellian nightmare, organized around the *songbun* system of good and bad class backgrounds and the cult of Kim Il Sung. I must confess that I am not sure how to evaluate it, but note that it is based almost exclusively on interviews with defectors. Although these can provide much valuable information, they must be used with care. Too frequently, CIA and “Human Rights” groups accept this information uncritically.

Even anthropologists who are trained to be objective find their results colored by their biases as Derek Freeman’s critique of Margaret Mead’s classic work, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, and the ensuing controversy shows (Freeman 1983).

Officially, the PDRK is composed of three classes: workers, peasants, and intellectuals, symbolized in the Korean hammer, sickle, and pen. No one claims that these classes enjoy equal standards but I know of little information on the degree of difference. It is also said that the residents of the capitol city of Pyongyang constitute an elite, which may very well be the case.

Che Guervara is said to have called North Korea the most egalitarian society in the world when he visited in the 1960s. Other accounts seem to confirm this and there is no mention of widespread poverty through the 1980s. The situation changed in the 1990s, however, as a result of a number of factors: the overthrow of the Soviet Union and collapse of the socialist trading network, the death of Kim Il Sung, and a series of natural disasters. It is Cumings notes that “no one knows how many people have died of starvation and disease since 1995 believes the best estimate is “about half a million dead from the famine and its consequences,” but indicates that conditions have improved since then (2004 pp. 178-182).

Cumings also hints of a wealthy class with “more than twenty-five “palatial villas’ on Mount Yaksan can now be seen from the highway running from Pyongyang to the Yongbyon nuclear complex.” (2004, p. 190) But, on the other hand, a Radio Netherlands Journalist who visited North Korea says:

To us it looks like a very poor country, but unlike in our society, poverty is more equally divided. Everyone is poor.

Even the elite in Pyongyang?

Yes

The food situation in North Korea is depressing. While it appears that Koreans were well fed during the 70s and 80s, a series of natural disasters in the 1990s led to the actual starvation of thousands of Koreans. The precise figures are unclear, but according to Bruce Cumings, the best estimate is that some 800,000 people starved to death in the mid-1990s. The situation has improved since then, but it remains dire. The tourist group KoryoGroupTravel, tells prospective travelers that:

DPRK is a country that has suffered severe food shortages over the last two decades and western NGOs have been operating in the DPRK for many years. Although the deepest famine situation has been largely relieved it is far from a culinary land of plenty. However as a visitor and guest in the DPRK you will be well fed with 3 meals a day including meat and fish. The food in DPRK is far from fantastic but is not too bad - some meals are very good and some are just good enough.

The food situation for the normal people of North Korea is still in a critical state, the supply of food still barely reaches the demand so the situation is still tenuous and malnutrition is a serious problem.

The latest (2012) report from the World Food Programme of the United Nations also indicates serious problems:

While malnutrition rates among children have decreased in the past decade, one in every three children remains chronically malnourished or ‘stunted’, meaning they are too short for their age. A quarter of all pregnant and breast-feeding women are also malnourished.  
<http://www.wfp.org/countries/korea-democratic-peoples-republic-dprk/overview>

According to the World Hunger Map of World Food Programme, North Korea is Category 4 (the second worst of 5), with 32% of the population undernourished. Only Haiti and some African nations are ranked 5, with 35% or more of the population undernourished.

The World Hunger Map also notes that “While food is the most basic of human needs required for survival, on average, 1 in 8 people go to bed hungry each night.” Other figures indicate that 30-50% of the food produced on our planet is wasted. This is inexcusable, but it is more an indictment of global capitalism than of those nations struggling to survive while building socialism.

#### **4. The Role of the Kim family.**

Like so much about North Korea, the role of Kim Il Sung and his successors may sound ridiculous to Western ears, but no more so than much of the patriotic nonsense spewed forth by our own propaganda machine. Many left-liberals have no difficulty idolizing the Dalai Lama and being deeply moved by the deep “spirituality” of “his holiness”—as if he were not the God-King of a feudal theocracy as brutal as any known in history and had not been on the CIA payroll for many years. At least Kim Il-sung had been a Communist since his youth and an effective leader of the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle before returning to Korea in 1945 to continue the anti-imperialist struggle. He led North Korea through its darkest hours during the Korean War and after. He led the re-building of North Korea into an independent nation that won the respect of other socialists.

For many of us in the West, socialism is a beautiful dream. But socialism cannot be built out of dreams, it can only be built in particular societies with real historical conditions and traditions. Our dream of a socialist world can only be built after the overthrow of U.S. imperialism. Kim played a leading role in the struggle against U.S. imperialism, and for this, he deserves our respect and understanding.

Such understanding requires that Kim Il Sung be placed in context. As Cumings notes:

When the Korean War broke out, few people knew anything about North Korea, but generally assumed it to be a typical Soviet satellite, a “people’s democracy” like those in Eastern Europe. The Red Army occupied the territory, rode herd on the emergence of a socialist state with a planned economy, and installed Kim Il Sung as its handpicked puppet: what else could it be? Recent studies based on a treasure trove of documents seized when United Nations forces occupied North Korea,” however, support different interpretations, which we can summarize as follows. First, North Korea evolved an indigenous political system in the late 1940s, and its basic structure has never changed substantially, so that in the fundamentals what you see in 1949 or 1950 is what you get in the 1990s. Second, the closest comparisons to North Korea were Romania and Yugoslavia—not the states under complete Soviet hegemony, such as East Germany. Third, Soviet influence competed with Chinese influence, and both conflicted with indigenous political forms and practices. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) was and is a divergent case among postwar Marxist-Leninist systems, representing a profound reassertion of native Korean political practice—from the superordinate role of the leader to his self-reliant ideology, to the Hermit Kingdom foreign policy. (Cumings 205, p. 224-225)

The importance of Kim Il Sung is written into the Constitution of the DPRK:

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a chuch'e-based socialist fatherland that embodies the idea and leadership of the great leader Comrade Kim Il Sung.  
The great leader Comrade Kim Il Sung is the founder of the DPRK and the father of socialist Korea.

Comrade Kim Il Sung founded the immortal chuch'e idea, and by organizing and leading the anti-Japanese revolutionary struggle under its banner, established glorious revolutionary traditions and achieved the historic cause of the fatherland's liberation. He founded the DPRK on the basis of laying a solid foundation for building an independent and sovereign state in the fields of politics, economy, culture, and military.

Comrade Kim Il Sung reinforced and developed the Republic into a popular masses-centered socialist country and a socialist state of independence, self-support, and self-defense by putting forward a chuch'e-oriented revolutionary line and wisely leading various stages of the social revolution and construction work. (Northeast Asia Matters 2009)

Here’s what Joan Robinson, the well known English economist had to say about Kim Il Sung after a short visit to North Korea in 1964:

The formal system of government is on the usual pattern of the socialist world. In practice it seems to be even more than usually concentrated in one individual. The outward signs of a "cult" are very marked—photographs, street names, toddlers in the nursery singing hymns to the beloved leader. But Prime Minister Kim Il Sung seems to function as a messiah rather than a dictator. After the war he went for 15 days to live in a remote village, and emerged with a program for agriculture and a style of work for the Party which would enlist the support of the peasants. He visits every plant and every rural district for "on- the-spot consultation" to clear up their problems. He comes to a hospital to say that the life of doctors and nurses must be devoted to the welfare of their patients, and this thought inspires their

work every day. He explains to the workers in the heavy machine plant that their products are the basis of industrialization, and pride renews their zeal. To us old cynics it sounds corny. But imagine a people hurled suddenly from a blank colonial past, without a clue, into socialism and into the twentieth century. He gives them a coherent and practicable vision of what they are to be. No deviant thought has a chance to sprout.

If professed liberals find all this abhorrent, their duty is plain: let them explain clearly to the people in the South what is happening in the North and leave them to choose which they prefer. (Robinson 1965, p. 548-549)

On does not have to be revolutionary or a socialist to appreciate North Korea's determination to be independent of Western domination. This has been their wish ever since Catholic missionaries started proselytizing in the early 19th Century, but it is no longer feasible in the 21st Century.

Neither the pundits of the mainstream media nor left-wing critics of North Korea seem to have considered the possibility that the DPRK and the Kim family remain in power because they enjoy the overwhelming support of the people. Yet if we follow Lenin's advice and look at all the data, even giving due weight to the lurid exposés of defectors and the gossip-page accounts of the extravagant lives of members of the Kim family, we see that evidence does indeed support this view. As CIA analysis Hunter says of the North Korean attitude toward Kim Il Sung, "Their cult worship of him was not simply contrived, it was apparently genuine to an amazing degree." (1999, p. 239)

This is the picture one gets from a film such as *State of Mind*, a British documentary "that offers a rare look into the communist society and the daily lives of North Korean families" by following two young North Korean gymnasts and their families as the girls train for the Mass Games, or Arirang, a spectacular nationalist celebration involving thousands of performers, said to be the largest such celebration in the world. (Gordon 2004) Here are some comments from this video:

13-year-old Pak Hyon Sun, a young North Korean gymnast

The U.S. is making life bad in our country, they are maneuvering to suppress the sound of happy laughter here.

At home, I was having fun playing with my mother and grandmother, then there would be a blackout or an air-raid drill. On their way down to the air-raid shelter, the mothers and grandmothers say, "this is all because of the Americans."

Because we were always doing things like air-raid drills, I think, just as we were taught at school, we have to endlessly hate the US and fight them to the end. (about 15 min in)

Unnamed teacher in front of class:

Where are the US imperialist aggressors attacking at this moment? Iraq. Looking at the state of affairs in the world at this moment, it's clear that the US imperialists cannot rest even for a moment from invading other countries. Furthermore, our revolution is progressing in such difficult circumstances today. With the intention of getting rid of our Korean socialism, the only socialism left on this Earth, these Americans are maneuvering to isolate, squash and suffocate our country. What do they want to do to socialism in the end? They want to totally demolish it. When we receive the Great Leader's leadership, we are destined to be eternally happy. (about 39 min)

Narrator:

For Hyon Sun this is her proudest moment. She will be at the center of the front row, the pivotal figure of the act. The honor could not be greater.

This is her chance to prove herself to be a perfect Communist. (about 4:30 min left)

The evidence supports the idea that most North Koreans believe themselves to be fortunate to live in their country.

Korean communism has always been striving for the same ideals as American communism, under much, much more difficult circumstances (which is not to make light of our own). We owe them understanding and support, not condescending and ethnocentric criticism. Only after we have walked in their shoes may we be qualified to judge them, only by then, perhaps, we will have no need to.

### **Reading “Escape from Camp 14.” A Political Review.**

This propaganda piece, essentially a sustained attack on the DPRK, will harm, not help, human rights in Korea and the world.

Already touted in testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations as an “excellent book” chronicling the life story of the “courageous and charismatic” Shin Dong-hyuk, “Escape from Camp 14” is an important read for anyone who wants to understand North Korea (Harden 2012).

Although favorably reviewed by the mainstream press and even leftists (Anthony 2012; Calleja 2012; DuChateau 2012; Goodreads 2013; Hong 2012; Jurek 2012; Kelch 2013; Kirkpatrick 2012b; Maslin 2012; NPR Staff 2012), “Escape” has escaped any critical review and one sees only laudatory comments.

It is naïve, however, to read “Escape” simply as one’s man’s struggle against inhuman conditions without contextualizing both the circumstances surrounding its writing (or ghostwriting) as well as the circumstances behind the camps themselves.

### **Shin’s True Story?**

The book tells the story of how Shin was born in a North Korean labor camp, escaped from the camp and North Korea at age 23, found his way alone across China to Shanghai, where he met a South Korean journalist who took him to the South Korean Consulate. The story is amazing. It deserves to be told, as do the stories of countless others who suffer and struggle under the inhumane conditions created by U.S. imperialism, for example Kim Son-myong, a South Korean dissident. As Bruce Cumings writes:

Since it is commonplace for Americans to sympathize with those victims of authoritarianism who share their ideals and to fall silent about those who do not, it may be instructive to end with the story of Kim Son-myong emerging from a jail cell in August 1995 like Rip Van Winkle, he had been behind bars for so long that another long-term political prisoner, Kim Sok-hyon (who had gotten out earlier), had to instruct him in how to use a telephone and how to turn on the television; others gently informed him that his ninety-three-year-old mother believed he had died twenty years earlier. Who was this man?

In the fierce conflict raging across the peninsula in October 1950, American intelligent officers captured Kim Son-myong, a southerner supporting the North, and turned him over to ROK authorities. They accused him of spying, which he denied; but he would not recant his political allegiance to P’yŏngyang. His jailers threatened him with execution and tortured

him, seeking a confession; meanwhile, they executed his father and his sister in order to pressure him further. When he still would not recant, they threw Kim into solitary confinement in a tiny cell for the next forty-four years. Forbidden to speak to anyone, to meet relatives, or to read anything, beaten frequently and surviving somehow on a “prison starvation diet,” he remained incarcerated because he would not “convert” and give up his political support of North Korea. “The guards would show me food, like a soup full of meat. And then they would just give me broth for dinner. They would say, ‘if you want food you better change your beliefs.’” He entered prison at twenty-nine and came out at seventy-three, still unrepentant. (Cumings 2005, pp. 392-393)

We need also to consider the stories emerging from the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up by the South Korean government in 2005 to investigate atrocities in Korean history from Japan's rule of Korea in 1910 through the end of authoritarian rule in South Korea in 1993. According to the New York Times:

Handicapped by a budget considered too small for such a vast task, the commission's work has been slow. Beyond that, it can neither force people to testify nor offer immunity for testimony, so few veterans have been willing to come forward. Some victims have stayed away as well, unwilling to open old wounds between neighbors caught up in the ideological struggle decades ago. Still, the commission has made progress in confirming long-suppressed stories of mass executions and in recovering the remains of victims. South Korean troops executed tens of thousands of unarmed civilians and prisoners as they retreated in advance of the North Korean invaders during the war, according to historians. The victims were often accused of being Communist sympathizers or collaborators. The commission's investigators have discovered the remains of hundreds of people — including women and children — who were killed without trial. They have also identified 1,222 probable instances of mass killings during the war. The cases include 215 episodes in which survivors say American warplanes and ground troops killed unarmed civilians. (Sang-hun 2007b)

We also need to hear the stories of those imprisoned at Guantánamo and the victims of the U.S. extraordinary rendition program, as well as those of the millions of children who starve to death every year in that part of the world kept free of the evils of Communism.

It is difficult to know how to evaluate the information in Harden's account. New York Times reporter Nicholas D. Kristof quotes Sidney R. Jones, the executive director of Human Rights Watch/Asia in New York, as saying “we don't have any systematic way of being able to evaluate credibly the stories we hear from defectors.” Kristof notes that other experts acknowledge that the information “has credibility problems,” but say the reports “sound right.” (Kristof 1996)

In spite of the publicity of “Escape,” Shin Dong-hyuk's own story remains unknown. His Korean-language memoir, “Escape to the Outside World,” was published in Seoul in 2007, but attracted little attention until Shin was discovered by a Washington Post reporter, Blaine Harden, who “had been searching for more than a year for a story that could explain how North Korea used repression to keep from falling apart.” Clearly, Shin's story met his requirements for a story that would “increase international pressure on North Korea.” He persuaded Shin to cooperate by promising a fifty-fifty split of revenues, noting that, “Our agreement, however, gave me control over the contents.” (“Escape,” pp. 7-9) By Harden's account, then, “Escape” is not Shin's own story, it is Blaine Harden's. Shin's story remains unknown except to those who can read Korean.

Harden tells how he wanted not just to tell Shin's story, but also present "a deeper account (that) would unveil the secret machinery that enforces totalitarian rule in North Korea" and show "how some of that oppressive machinery is breaking down." (p. 9) Harden considers himself an expert in this area:

Political implosion had become my specialty. For the Post and for the New York Times, I spent nearly three decades covering failed states in Africa, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the breakup of Yugoslavia, and the slow-motion rot in Burma under the generals. From the outside looking in, North Korea seemed ripe—indeed, overripe—for the kind of collapse I had witnessed elsewhere. In a part of the world where nearly everyone else was getting rich, its people were increasingly isolated, poor, and hungry. Still, the Kim family dynasty kept the lid on. Totalitarian repression preserved their basket case state. ("Escape," p.7)

Clearly, none of this editorializing is part of Shin's own story. These embellishments reflect the prejudices of the "human rights" community.

### **The "Human Rights" Propaganda Mill**

The propaganda value of Shin's story was immediately clear to Harden's superiors at the Washington Post. In an editorial, CEO Don Graham wrote:

High school students in America debate why President Franklin D. Roosevelt didn't bomb the rail lines to Hitler's camps. Their children may ask, a generation from now, why the West stared at far clearer satellite images of Kim Jong Il's camps and did nothing. ("Escape," p. 8)

The book has served its purpose well. As noted earlier, it was cited before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Shin is carefully coached for his public appearances, learning to assert, for example, that "Kim Jong Il was worse than Hitler" (see "Escape", pp. 176-191). Since reportedly Shin had never even heard of Kim Jon Il, much less Hitler, while in the camps (Harden 2008; Sang-Hun 2007a), this statement comes from his "human rights" handlers, not his experience in the camps.

Another product in this genre, *Aquariums of Pyongyang*, was described by Bush as "one of the most influential books I read during my presidency," and its author, Kang Choi-hwan, was invited to the White House to discuss North Korea ("Escape," p. 169). Clearly, this propaganda campaign is reaching the highest levels of U.S. policy-making.

Harden describes the labor camps in North Korea in the most lurid terms, comparing them to the Nazi concentration camps, which did include actual extermination camps, something not true of the North Korean labor camps. Harden asserts that:

Most North Koreans are sent to the camps without any judicial process, and many die without learning the charges against them . . . Guilt by association is legal in North Korea. A wrongdoer is often imprisoned with this parents and children. Kim Il Sung laid down the law 1972: "[E]nemies of class, whoever they are, their seed must be eliminated through three generations." (p. 6)

Like Nazi concentration camps, labor camps in North Korea use confinement, hunger, and fear to create a kind of Skinner box, a closed, closely regulated chamber in which guards assert absolute control over prisoners. Yet while Auschwitz existed for only three years, Camp 14 is a fifty-year-old Skinner box, an ongoing longitudinal experiment in repression and mind control in which guards breed prisoners whom they control, isolate, and pit against one another from birth. (p. 105)

Harden provides no sources to document his statement from Kim Il Sung or his view of Korean labor camps. In fact, aside from a few sources to bolster his case, Harden appears to have done little research on Korean culture, society, or history, not even citing the widely respected CIA analysis, Helen-Louise Hunter (1999). A more responsible journalist would have consulted an expert such as Bruce Cumings, who writes on the North Korean labor camps as follows:

Officially Kim Jong Il's gulag is made up of "educational institutions" that do not punish prisoners, but reeducate them. Common criminals who commit minor felonies and small fry with an incorrect grasp of their place in the family state who commit low-level political offenses go off to labor camps or mines for hard work and varying lengths of incarceration; murderers, repeat offenders, and big-time political criminals (particularly those who spy for the South) are incarcerated for good in some of the most godforsaken prisons in the world. Kang Chol-wan was held in the Yodok labor camp for ten years, and like most other prisoners, he went there with his family—a common practice and an odd aspect of the DPRK's belief in the family as the core unit of society. Mutual family support is also the reason that many survive the ordeal of prison. . . .

Cumings goes on to recount the story of Kang Choi-wan who was sent to the labor camps at age 9 with his parents, as recounted in his book, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, co-authored with Pierre Rigoulot, who also contributed to the notorious *Black Book of Communism*. Cumings continues:

*The Aquariums of Pyongyang* is an interesting and believable story, precisely because it does not, on the whole, make for the ghastly tale of totalitarian repression that its original publishers in France meant it to be; instead it suggests that a decade's incarceration with one's immediate family was survivable and not necessarily an obstacle to entering the elite status of residence in Pyongyang and entrance to college. Meanwhile we have a long-standing, never-ending gulag full of black men in our prisons, incarcerating upward of 25 percent of all black youths. This doesn't excuse North Korea's police state, but perhaps it suggests that Americans should do something about the pathologies of our inner cities—say, in Houston—before pointing the finger.

Although the U.S. prison system is known within the black community as "The New Jim Crow" (and properly so in my opinion), it is important to know that even in the U.S. the purpose of incarceration is not just punishment but also rehabilitation. Convicted felons are sent to prison AS punishment, not FOR punishment. Of course, there is a difference between correctional philosophy and actual practice in real prisons, in the United States as well North Korea, but it is important that this distinction be maintained.

Whatever the case in the U.S., Harden's account of life in North Korean labor camps cannot be viewed as an honest attempt to understand North Korean society. After all, that is not its goal. Harden is quite clear that his goal is "increase international pressure on North Korea." Unfortunately, he seems to be succeeding.

As told by Harden, Shin's story is compelling. It is skillfully interwoven with official "human rights" views of North Korea in such a way as to close all debate. It is used as a kind of slam dunk to silence anyone who may dissent from this orthodox view. For example, when Dennis Rodman returned from a basketball exhibition in Pyongyang, he expressed his friendship for Kim Jong Un as follows:

That's a human being. . . . He's a great guy. He's just a great guy . . . . It's amazing how we do the same thing here [prison camps like those in North Korea]. . . . It's amazing that we have Presidents over here do the same thing. . . . Guess what? . . . Guess what? . . . Guess what? Don't hate me. Guess what? Don't hate me. (Schlussel 2013)

(Rodman also told ABC's George Stephanopoulos on "This Week")

He wants Obama to do one thing: Call him. . . . He said, 'If you can, Dennis – I don't want [to] do war. I don't want to do war.' He said that to me. (Rea 2013)

Rodman's simple plea for more understanding between the U.S. and North Korea was greeted by an outpouring of abuse and ridicule in the mainstream press, including an editorial in the Boston Herald urging Rodman to read "Escape" before returning to North Korea. The editorial concludes by noting: "After Rodman's trip Shin proclaimed on Twitter that he will hate the former NBA player forever. In that he is hardly alone." (Boston Herald 2013)

Clearly, "Escape" should not be accepted superficially at face value, but must be evaluated as a product of an extensive "human rights" community centered in Washington and extending to Seoul and indeed covering the globe. The group includes Christian churches and NGOs and is engaged in humanitarian work helping North Korean refugees cope with difficult life in the South. Taken by itself, such humanitarian work may be laudable and one wishes it extended to undocumented workers crossing international borders closer to home, but that is another issue.

However, in addition to their humanitarian work, these groups also engage in political propaganda. Melanie Kirkpatrick's book, "Escape from North Korea: The Untold Story of Asia's Underground Railroad" (Kirkpatrick 2012a), has a fairly extensive discussion of this "human rights" network in a chapter titled "Invading North Korea. This includes a discussion of how North Korean exiles can be used in the "integration of North Korea into a united Korea" along the lines of what happened in Eastern Europe. The network includes Free North Korea Radio and other stations, which hope "to play the same role in opening North Korea as Western radio stations played in Eastern Europe during the Cold War." These stations are funded by the U.S. State Department and the National Endowment for Democracy, which Kirkpatrick describes as "a nonprofit, bipartisan organization created by Congress in 1983" but neglects to mention its role as front for CIA funding. The network also includes the North Korea People's Liberation Front, "a Seoul-based organization of more than one hundred former North Korean soldier who vow to overthrow the Kim family regime and unify the Korean peninsula." (Kirkpatrick 2012a, pp. 273, 306-307)

Kirkpatrick's description of the "human rights" campaign may be accepted as authoritative, since she herself is a former journalist/editor for the Wall Street Journal and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Her husband, Jack David, was Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction and Negotiations Policy during the Bush Administration.

The Free North Korea lobby thus has direct links into the U.S. military establishment, the same folks that owe so much of their wealth and power to the Korean War of 1950-53. Powerful voices within that establishment wanted to end the Korean War with nuclear weapons. General Douglas McArthur, for example stated in interviews published posthumously:

“I would have dropped between 30 and 50 atomic bombs . . . strung across the neck of Manchuria.” Then he would have introduced half a million Nationalist troops at the Yalu, and then “spread behind us—from the Sea of Japan to the Yellow Sea—a belt of radioactive cobalt . . . [which] has an active life of between 60 and 120 years. For at least 60 years there could have been no land invasion of Korea from the North.” He expressed certainty that the Russians would have done nothing: “my plan was a cinch.” (Cumings 2005, p. 290-291)

And they call Kim Il Sung evil and insane! As Cumings notes, “MacArthur sounds like a warmongering lunatic in these interviews, but if so he was not alone.” Nor is such thinking absent from the U.S. foreign policy elite at the present time. The U.S has continued to conduct regular war games and to threaten North Korea with nuclear attack.

### **Why the Camps?**

No one denies that North Koreans are suffering from extreme hardship and deprivation, and it is clear that labor camps exist, that they are not very pleasant places, and that abuses occur as they do in all prison systems. The question is, WHY do these camps exist. Harden’s implication is that they exist solely to support “the Kim family dynasty” and “their basket case state” which can only be preserved through “totalitarian repression.” (“Escape,” pp. 7-9)

Such a view ignores the reality of the Korean War and its aftermath. No nation in history has been subjected to such threats from such a disproportionately powerful enemy for so long. The wonder is not that the North Koreans may seem crazy to outsiders, but that have been able to resist for so long.

But it is not simply the threat of nuclear attack and the threatening war games of U.S. and South Korean forces that the DPRK has to endure, but a determined program of espionage and subversion.

It needs to be stressed that the labor camps exist not simply to intimidate and repress the North Korean people as is implied by Harden and other critics in the “human rights” community. North Korea faces a very real threat, not only of nuclear attack, but also espionage. John Feffer, co-director of Foreign Policy In Focus, describes the situation in an article, “Spying on the North:”

It started out as a routine briefing at a conference in Florida on U.S. special operations. One of the panelists, Army Brigadier General Neil Tolley, was talking about the importance of human intelligence in North Korea. A reporter, David Axe, dutifully wrote down Tolley’s comments and published his article in late May in *The Diplomat*, a foreign policy publication based in Tokyo. The article, quoting Tolley, claimed that U.S. Special Forces were already gathering human intelligence in North Korea.

“U.S. Special Forces have been parachuting into North Korea to spy on Pyongyang’s extensive network of underground military facilities,” wrote Axe. “That surprising disclosure, by a top U.S. commando officer, is a reminder of America’s continuing involvement in the ‘cold war’ on the Korean peninsula — and of North Korea’s extensive preparations for the conflict to turn hot.”

According to a National Assembly report, more than 13,000 agents worked on intelligence-gathering in the North. By 1972, more than 7,000 were casualties of the program: 300 confirmed dead, 4,849 missing in action, 203 injured, 130 captured, and more than 2,000 agents assigned to a mysterious “etc” category.

The infiltration program reportedly ended in the 1980s though training continued until the

1990s.

So, yes, the notion of going to extreme lengths to collect human intelligence and conduct operations in North Korea itself is not so far-fetched. According to the Pentagon's Operational Plan 5020, made public in 2003, U.S. commanders were to prepare for conflict with the North by conducting maneuvers around the country's borders and "sow confusion" within the North Korean military. From the Pentagon's perspective, it is not only useful to try to insert spies into North Korea but to have North Korea believe that spies are constantly in its midst. (Feffer 2012)

In view of this sort of espionage, North Korea's system of control makes a lot of sense, for it does indeed hamper U.S. and South Korean efforts to gather vital information to facilitate their attack. This point was made in an article, "'Hard Target' North Korea Poses Challenge to U.S. Spying," John Wolcott writes:

A simple fact is at the heart of the intelligence challenge posed by North Korea, David S. Maxwell, the associate director of the Security Studies program at Georgetown University in Washington, said in an interview. "What makes it hard for us to penetrate is the same control of information that keeps the regime in power," he said.

North Korea relies on an 11-year-old network of underground fiber-optic cables that's harder for outsiders to tap -- and easier for the authorities to monitor -- than are cell phones, satellite communications or the Internet.

Recruiting spies and extracting human intelligence from North Korea is even more difficult, in part because there is no U.S. embassy in Pyongyang to provide cover for U.S. intelligence officers. (Walcott 2011)

One has to assume that the North Koreans are aware of the role that "human rights" and "pro-democracy" groups, along with other forms of espionage, played in the overthrow of socialism in East Europe and Yugoslavia and are determined not to let this happen to them.

In a perceptive analysis of "The Challenge and Promise of Reunification," Hart-Landsberg notes that not only a majority of Koreans, but all governments concerned support reunification, but reunification means different things to different people. The South Korean government apparently favors "reunification by absorption" along lines of Germany, but this had disastrous consequences for the German working class. (Hart-Landsberg 1998, pp. 209-237)

### **Does Harden's Shin Speak for North Korean Emigrants?**

There reportedly some 23,000 refugees from the North in South Korea, and they continue to suffer economically and socially. Over half remain unemployed, and some have even returned to North Korea in desperation.

Apparently, prior to 1994, relatively few North Koreans emigrated to the South, less than ten a year. In 1994, the number increased to 52. The rate of increase continued in the 21st Century, reaching 2737 in 2011, but dropping to 1509 in 2012. (Wikipedia, North Korean defectors, citing the South Korean Ministry of Unification)

Not all emigrants have left North Korea for political reasons. Starving people tend to migrate in search of food, and one suspects that many emigrants are simply trying to escape the dire economic conditions caused in no small part by U.S. sanctions, the very thing that the "human rights" community wants more of.

There are also economic benefits for moving to South Korea.

In 1962, the South Korean Government introduced the "Special law on the protection of defectors from the North" (according to which) . . . every defector was eligible for a generous aid package. After their arrival in the South, defectors would receive an allowance. The size of this allowance depended on the category to which the particular defector belonged (there were three such categories). The category was determined by the defector's political and intelligence value. Apart from this allowance, defectors who delivered especially valuable intelligence or equipment were given large additional rewards. (More recently South Korea passed new regulations which) tighten defector screening processes and slash the amount of money given to each refugee from ₩28,000,000 (\$24,180.08) to ₩10,000,000 (\$8,635.743). South Korean officials say the new rules are intended to prevent ethnic Koreans living in China from entering the South, as well as stop North Koreans with criminal records from gaining entry. (Wikipedia, North Korean defectors)

Another more recent source confirms the economic benefits for emigrating from the North to South Korea:

By law, North Koreans are automatically given South Korean citizenship. When defectors come to South Korea they endure a month-long vetting process to check their background and make sure they are not North Korean spies. Then they are put into the two month re-education program at *Hanawon*, which provides defectors with social readjustment training, medical care, and counseling. Upon leaving, each North Korean adult receives a stipend of 36,960,000 won (about \$35,000) with the expectation that part of it will be used as a down payment for an apartment. Also, every defector is assigned a career counselor. All of this is provided by the South Korean government. Yet, despite all this support, North Koreans still have an extremely challenging time assimilating into a South Korean lifestyle. (Hubbard 2012)

Harden also confirms the economic benefits available to "all those who flee the North," including a three month indoctrination into South Korean life and ideology. They learn, for example, "that the Korean War started when North Korea launched an unprovoked surprise invasion of the South." As Harden explains, this is "a history lesson that flabbergasts most newcomers from the North." ("Escape," p. 161) I'm guessing that many historians might also be flabbergasted to see a Washington Post reporter repeat such a simplistic, one-sided view of the Korean conflict without comment. Does Harden not know any better? Or simply not care about the truth?

The picture of North Korean society that emerges from North Korean emigrants as filtered through the "human rights" propaganda mill is indeed chilling. But it would be a mistake to regard it as reflecting some kind of Hegelian essence of North Korea. Whatever their reasons for leaving, it is simply not the case that most North Koreans in the South harbor ill feelings toward their homeland. Consider the following:

As part of their series "Ask a North Korean", NK News asked North Korean Jae-young about the good things about life in the hermit state, and the recent refugee is easily able to find something to miss. Jay-young says that her life in North Korea was "mentally rich – even if it was materially insufficient" and that affection between neighbors was "very pure and deep".

She writes about the joyful side of life in North Korea:

On major holidays, we invited our neighbors (we used to call my mother's friends "aunt"), shared food and stories with them. My mom was really good at making 'Jong-Pyun rice

cake' and I can still remember my aunts exclaiming how good they tasted. During nights, we gathered together, turned music on and danced. On days when electricity went out, we used to play the accordion, sing, dance and have fun. I used to have so much fun and danced so hard that my socks had holes when I checked them in morning. My father used to be respected as a gagman (comedian).

Jay-young goes on to write about the free education and healthcare, but admits that many of the supposedly free services were not free in practice. She concludes, "Everything was suffocating and pitiful in North Korea, but it is a country that I have many positive memories from". (Taylor 2012a)

There are even some North Koreans who, after trying life in the South, return to North Korea, perhaps as many as one hundred in 2012 alone (Taylor 2012b). Contrary to what one might think from reading the "human rights" literature, they are not punished or executed, but welcomed in the policy of Kim Jong Un. Here are some statements from a press conference for returnees in Pyongyang on Jan 24, 2013:

"I left for South Korea because I was totally deceived. The grim reality of South Korean society is something you could hardly imagine; I spent nearly all of it anxious and in tears. I could not find a job anywhere in the South because of my status as a defector." "I longed for my children [that I left behind in the North], and yearned for the embrace of my homeland. I lied to the South Korean authority that I would bring my kids back and entered North Korea via China." (Ko Kyung-hee)

"South Korea was a very dirty world. We had a silly idea that if we work hard we can become rich, but their world felt so Machiavellian and sinister, so full of malice and deception...we just could not live in that kind of world any more." (Kim Kwang-ho and Kim Ok-shil) (Ryan 2013)

A degree of skepticism is of course in order, but if one is going to read propaganda, one should at least read both sides.

And so it is far from clear that the propaganda mills of the "human rights" community even speak for expatriate North Korean, much less the Korea people as a whole. Most South Koreans, as Harden complains, have little interest "in teaching the North a lesson," but are more concerned with "preserving peace and protecting living standards." (p. 170) Perhaps this is because most Koreans know their own history better than Harden.

### **Humanizing the People of North Korea**

As U.S. imperialism edges closer and closer to the brink of war against the DPRK, it is important to try to understand the North Korean people themselves, and how they view the threat from the United States. A good start is the film, "State of Mind," by a British journalist looking at the lives of two teen-age gymnasts in North Korea (Gordon 2004). Here, a schoolteacher is telling her class:

Where are the US imperialist aggressors attacking at this moment? Iraq. Looking at the state of affairs in the world at this moment, it's clear that the US imperialists cannot rest even for a moment from invading other countries. Furthermore, our revolution is progressing in such difficult circumstances today. With the intention of getting rid of our Korean socialism, the only socialism left on this Earth, these Americans are maneuvering to isolate, squash and suffocate our country. What do they want to do to socialism in the end? They want to totally demolish it.

Or, in the words of 13-year-old Pak Hyon Sun, a young North Korean gymnast:

The U.S. is making life bad in our country, they are maneuvering to suppress the sound of happy laughter here.

At home, I was having fun playing with my mother and grandmother, then there would be a blackout or an air-raid drill. On their way down to the air-raid shelter, the mothers and grandmothers say, “this is all because of the Americans.”

Because we were always doing things like air-raid drills, I think, just as we were taught at school, we have to endlessly hate the US and fight them to the end.

Based on this and other evidence it seems quite clear that the people of North Korea understand the threat of U.S. imperialism and the risks of war far better than do the American people, including many American “leftists.” For another eye-opening view of North Korean understanding of the U.S., take a look at the North Korean film “Propaganda,” which is truly mind-boggling in its accuracy. (North Korea 2012)

As I understand Marx’s humanism, it is crucial that we understand the people of any society, including North Korea, as human beings who want to enjoy life with their families, free from foreign intervention. The people of North Korea fully understand the threat of U.S. imperialism and fully support their government and leadership in their efforts to protect North Korea from U.S. aggression. Although this point is lost among some “left” circles, the CIA understands it. As CIA analysis Helen-Louise Hunter says of the North Korean attitude toward Kim Il Sung,

What is truly remarkable about him and is so rarely true of dictators who warp a society to the degree that he warped North Korean society is that the people—most of them, anyway—appear to have revered him as a person, as a father figure, and as the “great leader” of their nation. Their cult worship of him was not simply contrived; it was apparently genuine to an amazing degree. (Hunter 1999, p. 239)

Or, as British economist Joan Robinson remarked after her visit to North Korea:

The formal system of government is on the usual pattern of the socialist world. In practice it seems to be even more than usually concentrated in one individual. The outward signs of a "cult" are very marked—photographs, street names, toddlers in the nursery singing hymns to the beloved leader. But Prime Minister Kim Il Sung seems to function as a messiah rather than a dictator. After the war he went for 15 days to live in a remote village, and emerged with a program for agriculture and a style of work for the Party which would enlist the support of the peasants. He visits every plant and every rural district for "on-the-spot consultation" to clear up their problems. He comes to a hospital to say that the life of doctors and nurses must be devoted to the welfare of their patients, and this thought inspires their work every day. He explains to the workers in the heavy machine plant that their products are the basis of industrialization, and pride renews their zeal. To us old cynics it sounds corny. But imagine a people hurled suddenly from a blank colonial past, without a clue, into socialism and into the twentieth century. He gives them a coherent and practicable vision of what they are to be. No deviant thought has a chance to sprout.

If professed liberals find all this abhorrent, their duty is plain: let them explain clearly to the people in the South what is happening in the North and leave them to choose which they prefer. (Robinson 1965, p. 548-549)

Even those emigrating from North Korea seem to agree that support for the government and their leaders is high. According to the New York Times:

It is striking in speaking to the defectors that for all of the horrors they portray, they do not contend that North Korea is seething with discontent. On the contrary, many suggest that ordinary North Koreans have faith in their leaders. (Kristof 1996)

In contrast to the popularity of “Escape,” the autobiographical memoir of Ri In Mo, *My Life and Faith*, tells a much different story, that of his early affinity for the DPRK’s ideology, his capture in 1952 and 34 years of torture and imprisonment in South Korea, and his return to his homeland in 1993. Ri’s book, which I have only now ordered from North Korea Books in Winnipeg, presents “a point of view completely unknown in the West...that of utter love and devotion and sacrifice for a country, political system, and especially leadership, that (most) of the rest of the world prefers to despise and hate.” (Morgan 2012) It is unlikely to be widely read in the U.S., or even made available.

Fortunately, the government and leadership of the DPRK is a question to be decided by the people of North Korea, not by American “leftists” or by American “human rights” imperialists.

As Marxists, it is important to combine Marx’s humanism with Marx’s political economy as well as Lenin’s analysis of imperialism. When we do this, we will understand what is behind U.S. sanctions, war threats, and phony “human rights” propaganda. We will not let ourselves be fooled into thinking all this has anything to do with the freedom and well being of the Korean people.

### **Solidarity with the Toilers of East Asia**

The threat of war through designed miscalculation in East Asia is real. It emanates not from Pyongyang, Seoul, Beijing, or even Tokyo. It’s roots lie on the shores of the Potomac and Hudson Rivers. It is the American people who must learn how to reign in their government for the sake of peace in Asia and through the world.

The “human rights” campaign misses its mark. (is disingenuous.) Claiming to support human rights in North Korea,, it advocates policies that can only increase the suffering of the people of Korea. If the camps exist primarily in response to threats from the United States and South Korea, increasing their pressure on North Korea can only make the situation worse. If we are concerned with the near starvation of North Koreans, we might better ask the U.S. government to stop using food as a political weapon, for this is precisely what our government has been doing. As *The National Fork* complains, “What should be a source of nourishment and human interconnectedness is instead a weapon used to create fear and control across national borders.” (*The National Fork* 2012) The dire condition of food insecurity in North Korea is not due to internal factors, for the U.S. has long used denial of food aid to destabilize the North Korean government.

As a former US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, Christopher Hill, recently editorialized:

if denying food aid would result in a famine that the North Korean regime could not withstand, what could such a decision mean for eventual relations among Korean peoples living in the northern and southern parts of a unified country?

In the coming weeks, South Korea's government will confront one of the toughest choices that any government can face: whether the short-term cost in human lives is worth the

potential long-term benefits - also in terms of human lives - that a famine-induced collapse of North Korea could bring. (Hill 2011a), see also (Read 2011).

Clearly, “human rights” advocates could help the Korean people more by advocating a more humane policy on the part of the U.S. government that by continuing their calls for “pressure” on the already beleaguered North Koreans.

On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave what many believe to be his greatest speech and the one that got him killed: “Beyond Vietnam.” In this speech Dr. King noted that the United States government was “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today,” and further observed that:

The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality [applause], and if we ignore this sobering reality, we will find ourselves organizing “clergy and laymen concerned” committees for the next generation. They will be concerned about Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned about Mozambique and South Africa. We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy. [sustained applause] . . .

I am convinced that if we are to get on to the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin [applause], we must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. . . .

A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies. (King 1967)

Dr. King’s sentiments continue to resonate in light of our continuing wars and continuing reliance on nuclear weapons, torture, and withholding food as crucial parts of our foreign policy. Rather than demonizing and dehumanizing the North Korean people who have suffered so much at the hands of the U.S., those concerned with the well-being of the Korean working class might well re-read the prophetic words of America’s greatest spiritual leader and reflect on their meaning for the Twenty First Century.

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## For Further Study:

I understand that all the above will be lost among those who already know everything they need to know about North Korea. For people with open minds, however, I recommend a few simple sources to give a better picture of the people of Korea.

Probably the best way to humanize the people of North Korea is view two films by British journalist Daniel Gordon:

"A State of Mind." 2004. Starring: Jong-il Kim, Hyon Sun Pak, Directed by Daniel Gordon. (1hr 30m video available on Netflix) Two young North Korean gymnasts prepare for an unprecedented competition in this documentary that offers a rare look into the communist society and the daily lives of North Korean families. For more than eight months, film crews follow 13-year-old Pak Hyon Sun and 11-year-old Kim Song Yun and their families as the girls train for the Mass Games, a spectacular nationalist celebration involving thousands of performers. (Gordon 2004)

"Crossing the Line." 2006. Directed by Daniel Gordon A British documentary about US Army defector James Dresnok currently living in North Korea after having defected during the 60s. Available from amazon.com. (Gordon 2006)

There are also some excellent brief views of North Korea from socialist perspectives:

Gowans, Stephen. 2006. "Understanding North Korea." in Global Research, November 12, 2006 & What's Left 12 November 2006. (Gowans 2006)  
<http://www.globalresearch.ca/understanding-north-korea/3818>

Hill, Monica. 2011. "Behind the US demonization of North Korea." Freedom Socialist: Voice of Revolutionary Feminism. February 2011 (Hill 2011b)  
<http://www.socialism.com/drupal-6.8/?q=node/1574>

Parenti, Michael. 2009. "North Korea: 'Sanity' at the Brink." MR Zine (Parenti 2009)  
<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2009/parenti250609.html>

Socialist Voice, CP Ireland 2012. "How To Think About Socialism in Korea." Marxism-Leninism Today (Socialist Voice 2012) <http://mltoday.com/subject-areas/socialism-today/how-to-think-about-socialism-in-korea-1302.html>

As for "Propaganda," the truly mind-boggling film on the United States: "According to the description, this is "a film called "PROPAGANDA", a documentary about capitalism, imperialism, mass manipulation of western culture for the purpose of commodification, and how it permeates every aspect of the lives of blissfully ignorant, borderline zombie masses." " while we can talk all we want about North Korea being a backwards nation, about what's wrong with their society (never mind the fact that none of us actually know what the fuck their society is even like, basing our opinion off – you guessed it – what the media's told us) the fact of the matter remains, this IS our society." (North Korea 2012) Read more, and watch at: <http://superchief.tv/leaked-north-korean-documentary-exposes-western-propaganda-and-its-scary-how-true-it-is/>

Also, for my money, the best view of the Korean people is Bruce Cumings study, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2005).

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