The best of all possible countries


Abstract (summary)

Can a country the size of Pennsylvania, with one of the world's largest military forces, endure? [...] 1970, North Korea's living standards were higher than capitalist South Korea's, a source of lingering Northern pride.

Full Text

N O T H I N G T O E N V Y
Ordinary Lives in North Korea
By Barbara Demick
Spiegel & Grau.
314 pp. $26

T H E C L E A N E S T R A C E
How North Koreans See Themselves -- and Why It Matters
By B.R. Myers
Melville House.
200 pp. $24.95

"If you look at satellite photographs of the Far East by night, you'll see a large splotch curiously lacking in light," writes Barbara Demick on the first page of "Nothing to Envy." "This area of darkness is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea."

As a correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, Demick discovered that the country isn't illuminated any further by traveling there. So she decided to penetrate North Korea's closed society by interviewing the people who had gotten out, the defectors, with splendid results.

Of the hundred North Koreans Demick says she interviewed in South Korea, we meet six: a young kindergarten teacher whose aspirations were blocked by her father's prewar origins in the South ("tainted blood"); a boy of impeccable background who made the leap to university in Pyongyang and whose impossible romance with the kindergarten teacher forms the book's heart; a middle-age factory worker who is a model communist, a mother of four and the book's soul; her daughter; an orphaned young man; and an idealistic female hospital doctor, who looked on helplessly as the young charges in her care died of hunger during the 1996-99 famine. When asked years later whether she remembers any of the children, the doctor answers, "All
Demick chose her subjects from a single town, provincial Chongjin, far from Pyongyang, which gives the book a powerful sense of place. An industrial and mining center in the country's north, Chongjin was among the areas hardest hit by the famine, which claimed between 600,000 and 1 million lives, an unprecedented loss for an urban, literate society during peacetime. "Nothing to Envy" conveys the emotional riptides and overall disintegration of stopped factories, unpaid salaries and piled-up corpses. Animals that might have provided food disappeared; even frogs were hunted to near extinction. Only the propaganda never let up. The book's title comes from a North Korean song called "We have nothing to envy in the world." Songs and slogans -- and dead leaders -- have staying power here: People still chirp, "Long live Kim Il Sung," who died in 1994 but formally remains president during the rule of his son, Kim Jong Il.

"The Cleanest Race," by B.R. Myers, claims to debunk our misconceptions about North Korea. A U.S.-born, German-trained expert on North Korea, he reminds us that the regime owes a great deal to fascist legacies of Japanese colonial rule (1905-45), and he brilliantly shows how North Korean novels -- books we are lucky not to have to read -- are obsessed with the belief that Koreans form a uniquely pure and spiritual race, a worldview also widely held in South Korea, where Myers lives. The author's prose is spirited, even angry. By dissecting the regime's domestic propaganda, which he calls the Text, Myers purports to tell us what "the North Koreans believe." He asserts, for example, that "if anything, the famine may have strengthened support for the regime" because the North Korean leadership blamed the United States for the shortages. The concept of "support" is complicated in a police state with an estimated 150,000 gulag prisoners, but Myers is right that dictatorships also wield powerful myths -- in this instance, the characterization of foreigners as evil and racially polluting. The only way for North Korea to account for the deprivation and to elicit continued sacrifices is to contrive regular crises that reinforce the sense of hostile encirclement.

Myers argues that the North Korean regime believes its own paranoid, race-based xenophobia. What choice does it have? Pyongyang's "confrontational anti-Americanism," Myers concludes, "constitutes its last remaining source of legitimacy." So much for negotiation with a leadership that, the author shrewdly notes, likes to "boast to its own people that it had signed a nuclear treaty in bad faith."

Can a country the size of Pennsylvania, with one of the world's largest military forces, endure? Until 1970, North Korea's living standards were higher than capitalist South Korea's, a source of lingering Northern pride. But all the while fertilizer, pharmaceuticals, X-ray machines and more were coming at low or no cost from Moscow, East Berlin and Prague. Today different kinds of subsidies make possible North Korea's continued existence.

During the 1990s foreign countries sent massive famine relief aid, much of which the regime diverted to itself. The country's current revenues come from counterfeiting American dollars, the illegal export of weapons to other rogue states, tourism from South Korea and aid from China. Above all, North Korea blackmails Washington and Seoul for hundreds of millions of dollars by sort of testing nuclear devices and misfiring hunks of metal resembling missiles into the sea. China fears the chaos of implosion, South Korea fears the costs of precipitous unification, and the United States fears nuclear proliferation. So all pay up. Authoritarian regimes can sometimes be undone by choking off the hard currency that flows as patronage to well-fed security and military elites. Or they can sometimes be transformed over the long run by engagement. The North Korean regime's main worry, Myers writes, is that "the masses might cease to perceive the U.S. as an enemy."

About 100,000 North Korean refugees have fled to China (three-quarters of them female) out of a total population of perhaps 23 million, while at least 15,000 have reached South Korea, most in the past decade. Back in July 2002, a beset North Korean regime partially decriminalized entrepreneurialism but soon sought to clamp down on spontaneous markets and reassert the statist heavy-industry economy. The propaganda proudly declares that the country will not integrate with the global economy because that would mean the end of the North Korean state. Nothing to envy.