

An Antidote to Disinformation about North Korea

Book Review; North Korea: Another Country, By Bruce Cumings, The New Press, 2004

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Bruce Cumings, a history professor at the University of Chicago and a former Peace Corps volunteer in South Korea, has given us a badly needed antidote to the lies and disinformation about the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (North Korea) being spread by the media and the Bush administration. The author has observed “the deafening absence of any contrary argument” and cuts through this smokescreen of ignorance in his well-researched historical study of North Korea.

Cumings directs his book to “the reader who wishes to learn about our eternal Korean enemy.” He believes that North Korea is a nation that cannot be understood apart from its historical past, including the “terrible fratricidal war (Korean War) that has never ended”; the 1930s guerrilla struggle against the Japanese and North Korea’s eventual emergence as a state in 1945; its relations with the South; its reaction to the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union; and “its interminable daily struggle” with the United States.

The author claims to have no sympathy for the North Korean government, but instead he admits to empathy for the underdog, “which is something I can’t help.” Cumings charges the U.S. with a significant responsibility “for the garrison state that emerged on the ashes of our truly terrible destruction of the North a half a century ago.”

Yes, the “history” spoon fed to Americans completely omits the holocaust from the air carried out by U.S. bombers and fighter planes against North Korean cities during the Korean War.

American planes dropped tens of thousands of bombs and many hundreds of tons of napalm on cities in North Korea. Even Winston Churchill criticized the savagery of the American attack when he commented, “When napalm was invented in the latter stages of World War II, no one contemplated that it would be ‘splashed’ over a civilian population.” Three million North Koreans died during this conflict, and 18 out of its 22 largest cities were 50 percent to 100 percent obliterated.

Cumings notes that by 1952, most of the survivors living in central and North Korea lived in caves. North Korea continued to burrow underground, and today it has over 15,000 underground facilities, many made of hardened concrete to survive nuclear attacks and American bombs. These include factories, plane hangars, and many other kinds of installations. The author again emphasizes that North Korea is a garrison state “because of the holocaust the North experienced during the Korean War.”

The 50th anniversary of the armistice ending the Korean War came and went on July 27, 2003, and 40,000 American troops remain in South Korea, where they have been since occupying the country in September 1945.

Cumings bitterly criticizes U.S. policy towards North Korea. On human rights issues, he points out how the U.S. has been fast to criticize the Communists “while ignoring the reprehensible behavior of our allies, that is, U. S. support for dictators who make Kim Jung Il look enlightened (the Saudis, for example).”

In addition, Cumings blames American confusion on an “irresponsible media” which lacks good investigative reporters, and is often “egged on by government officials.” He also blames South Korean security forces who “have succeeded for decades in getting Americans to stare blankly at one side of the Korean civil conflict, like a pigeon with nystagmus such that its head turns only to the left.”

The author stridently criticizes and blames the Bush administration for the ongoing crisis with North Korea. He accuses Bush of walking away from groundwork laid by Clinton for the resolution of the crisis. Cumings compares the foreign policy of the Bush administration to “amateur night at a halfway house,” and fears a real danger from “a mix of situations in which Bush’s preemptive strike doctrine could trigger war.”

He also castigates the radical right for their predictions of North Korea’s imminent collapse; they are “wrong-wrong-wrong,” he says, and cites a 1999 speech by CNN International President Joe Eason, a frequent visitor to the North, who stated “these guys (North Koreans) will tough it out for centuries, just the way they are.”

Part of the book is devoted to North Korean society and its development under socialism. Modern Korea had emerged from a class-divided, highly stratified society in which a long-standing system of chattel slavery had only been abolished in 1894.

North Korea experienced what Cumings terms a “smooth” transition to socialism following World War II. He partially attributes the transitional change to a long-time Korean tradition of “sharing and mutual aid of all kinds.”

Agricultural land was collectivized while farmers were able to keep their own homes and small garden plots. He credits the gardens as greatly helping farmers during the famine of the 1990s. North Korean farmland was worked communally, and farmers received a share of the harvest based on the number of hours of work they had done.

Formally low- and middle-class families now occupied favored social positions, and formally wealthy families who remained in the North could work and earn their way back up the social ladder. Only the very bottom rung was permanently reserved for Japanese collaborators.

Cumings pays careful attention to the weather and crop disasters of the 1990s. North Korea experienced record-breaking floods (1995 and 1996) followed by an equally severe drought and famine (1997). The author believes that the food shortage problem “has provided little evidence of a collapse of state power, except for breakdowns at the local level.” And Cumings adds, even at its worst, “the famine only began to approach India’s year-in, year-out toll (in proportionate terms) of infant mortality and deaths from malnutrition or starvation which I only mention because the media’s recent habit of depicting Kim Jung Il’s

frolicking among a heap of starved cadavers.”

Finally, Cumings describes a declassified CIA report on North Korea, and a part of that report which describes the achievements of that society. The report says “North Korea provides compassionate care for war orphans in particular and children in general; ‘radical change’ in the position of women (there are 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.’”

Cumings book provides a valuable service with its informative and truthful portrayal of North Korea. This book is valuable for combating the inevitable lies of the Bush administration in its imperial quest for global domination. North Korea faces the very real danger of war and more suffering at the hands of a bellicose Bush administration — a very good reason for this work to be widely read and passed on to other interested persons.

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