

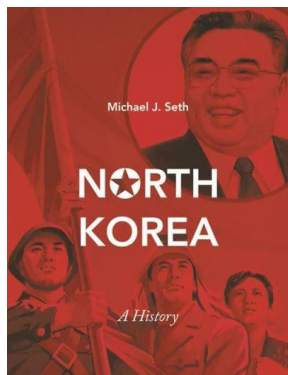
*North Korea: A History*

Michael J. Seth

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Reviewed by Brandon Palmer



**N**orth Korea is frequently in the news, usually for the wrong reasons: It has detonated nuclear bombs, tested ballistic missiles, and violated the human rights of its citizens. Yet, despite this coverage, North Korea remains one of the most enigmatic and misunderstood countries because so little is known about its politics, society, and economy. Luckily, this book will help illuminate that lacunae. The stated goal of this book is to “make sense” of North Korea as “more than an aberrant bit of history or a security issue,” but is a logical outgrowth of the Korean people’s drive for independence and, after the division of the peninsula, for unification (vii).

*North Korea: A History* by Michael Seth goes a long way toward demystifying the basic history of this modern hermit kingdom. Seth, an author of other quality surveys of Korean history, has a talent for writing a historical narratives that balance chronological breadth with evidentiary depth. The book provides a unbiased accounting of the North Korea state, making an effort not to promote the South Korean historical perspective, nor to serve as an apologist for the North Korean regime. Instead, he walks the tightrope of writing history for the sake of history.

The book is divided into an introduction and seven chapters, and emphasizes the historical progression of the North Korean state. The focus of Chapter One is on the colonial origins of the Korean communist movement in Korea and China. Seth maintains that North Korea’s most defining characteristics are its hyper-nationalism and its anti-imperialism. The movement’s primary goal was to achieve Korean independence: initially from Japan, and after Korea’s liberation, morphed into a struggle against American imperialism. During the Japanese colonial era, Kim Il Sung earned a name for himself as a guerilla fighter in Manchuria, but eventually found refuge in the Soviet Union. Kim’s reputation as a freedom fighter became the foundation of his legitimacy as the ruler of North Korea.

Chapter Two examines the division of Korea in 1945 between the United States and the Soviet Union, and how this supposedly temporary division led to the emergence of two Korean states. This chapter does a good job of explaining why the Soviets settled on Kim Il Sung as a ruler, rather than a Korean communist from China or Korea. Seth argues that the Soviets had no master plan for Kim’s ascent, but rather the chaotic situation merely played out in his favor. The final pages of this chapter explore the causes, conduct, and impact of the Korean War (1950-1953).

In Chapter Three, Dr. Seth explores Kim Il Sung’s consolidation of power, which included various purges, between 1953 and 1967. During this period Marxism-Leninism was largely replaced by *juche* (self-reliance) “as the ideological basis of society” (176). The chapter includes a good discussion of the balancing act by the North Korean government between China, which saved Kim’s regime during the Korean War, and the Soviet Union, which provided most of the aid going into North Korea. Kim wanted to ensure that no external power impinged upon his country’s sovereignty. One interesting point in this chapter was the coverage of North Korea’s adaptation of China’s Great Leap Forward; North Korea avoided the extremes and chaos experienced by the Chinese.

Chapter Four summarizes the period between 1967 and 1980, a period that can be considered the golden age of the North Korean government and society. During the late-1960s and into the 1970s, North Korea was the more successful of the Korean states, something that bolstered its claims to be the more legitimate of the two Korean regimes. During this period, the cult of Kim and the ideology of *juche* emerged in full force. Seth notes that Kim’s personality cult differed from Mao’s and Stalin’s because it included family members, namely his parents. This chapter also delves more fully into North Korean society by addressing the formation of the three hereditary social classes (*kyech’ung*), and covering a range of issues related to the living standards, family, gender, art, and social regimentation.

Chapter Five recounts the slow decline of the North Korean economy and political system from 1980 to 1994 as the nation moved toward extremism and loss of aid from the Soviet Union. A notable feature of this period was that as North Korea became more isolated, it veered toward ultra-nationalism. The 1980s also witnessed the rise of South Korea’s economy and international prestige, both of which impacted North Korea’s relationship with Russia and China.

In Chapter Six, Seth reviews the ‘Arduous Journey’ of North Korea as it suffered through a manmade famine under Kim Jong Il. This chapter examines the years between 1994 and 2005 by looking as the causes and consequences of the famine. Specifically, Seth notes that the famine forced the regime to undertake minor reforms because of the the collapse of the public distribution system and the rise of black markets. Despite the famine (or because of it), Kim Jong Il turned to a Military First (*son’gun*) policy, in which the military took precedent over all other institutions as it became the center of society, which is exemplified by the pursuit of nuclear weapons.

And Chapter Seven serves as a conclusion for the book, which takes the historical narrative up through 2017. As North Korea recovers from the famine under the leadership of Kim Jong Un, the government has attempted to roll back reforms and to reestablish control over all aspects of everyday life. Furthermore, North Korea's confrontational stance on the international scene has resulted in its becoming a pariah state. Dr. Seth concludes that North Korea, at present, oversaw a failed revolution because of the inequality within its society, the ongoing humanitarian crises (gulags and starvation), and the regime becoming internationally reviled.

This work has many strong points that make it a resource for the specialist and nonspecialist alike. First, this study offers useful background discussions of Northeast Asian politics that assist readers who have limited knowledge of Korean affairs. For example, several of the policies pursued by the North Korean regime mirrored the Chinese Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, but with distinct variations. Seth discusses the history those Chinese movements which provide context for the reader. Also, each chapter establishes the global setting for some policies pursued by North Korea: the Vietnam War, the War on Terror, and others, all led to policy decisions by the North Korean regime.

A second contribution of this book is that it outlines North Korea's state-society relationship. North Korean society, according to Seth, has undergone constant political indoctrination and never-ending campaigns to boost production and to anchor the Cult of Kim.

The government has placed an emphasis on agricultural and industrial production, and to meet these output goals, the regime introduced the Ch'ollima Movement, the T'aean Industrial System, and the Three Revolutions Team Movement (which sent youth sent to factories and farms to speed production). These movements have been replicated over and over. Dr. Seth also reviews the ways that the government has regimented and controlled everyday life: workers had study sessions, civilians had self-criticism workshops, and so forth. Nearly all of these contributed toward the personality cult of the Kim family.

And a third strong point of the book is that it contextualizes North Korea's development of its nuclear program and the emergence of its prison system. Dr. Seth notes that both have proven problematic for its allies. He notes that the nuclear weapons have proven to provide the North Koreans with a status it lacked previously, even if thousands died of famine because funds were misappropriated. And the gulags are shown to have a long history in North Korea, and are mostly tied to the lower social classes of society.

Dr. Seth raises issue with North Korea's leadership which has been shortsighted in its international diplomacy and economic policies, largely due to their insularity and lack of advanced education. Most of the leadership derived their power from their connections to the Manchurian guerrilla partisans, of which Kim Il Sung was the leader. Some examples of their poor decisions were to roll back the progress made with the South following the Sunshine Policy of the 1990s—all because the president of South Korea, Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013), called for closer monitoring of aid being sent to North Korea. North Korea has also undertaken a series of other hostile actions taken that have damaged its reputation: the sinking of South Korean naval vessels, the bombardment of South Korean islands near the North Korean border, the various assassination attempts of South Korean presidents all have served to alienate North Korea.

The one area I felt the book could be improved is its coverage of the Korean War. There were eight pages devoted to the conflict, and most of that discussion focused on the basic history of the course, conduct, and impact of the war. If a second edition is released (which I hope for), the narrative should more fully address the Chinese-North Korean relations during the conflict, the goals of the North Koreans during the negotiation process, and more coverage of wartime North Korean society.

There is a dearth of survey books on North Korea, and this book is a great starting point for understanding the regime. This work is perfectly suited for an undergraduate course on modern Korea, or even a general history of East Asia. The content is accessible enough to be used in an honors high school classroom. The chapters are self-contained and can be used piecemeal, if necessary. The book is intended to provide a general overview of North Korean history; I recommend pairing it with books that provide a more personal view of North Korea: For example, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* is an autobiography of a family sent to a prison camp for a decade; *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* includes roughly a dozen personal narratives from defectors who grew disillusioned with the regime; and *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom* is an autobiography of a girl who grew up in North Korea, but fled to China after nearly starving to death.

In conclusion, the goal of this book is designed to introduce the reader to a basic historical evolution of North Korea society and politics, and it does this task admirably. I have taught courses on Modern Korea for over a decade, but, until now, did not have a quality reading for my students. I strongly recommend this book for teachers, students, and the general public interested in North Korea.

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