

By Barbara Demick.

Published by Granta (ISBN 978-1-84708-141-4)

Reviewed by Adam Dempsey, Research Associate, UK Defence Forum

Barbara Demick's coverage of the war in Sarajevo won the Robert F. Kennedy award and was also shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize. In 2001 she became correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, covering both North and South Korea. As in common with many journalists, it proved difficult for Demick to visit the North. When she eventually gained access reporting was severely limited by the regime's employment of minder's to guide journalists on pre-planned tours. There was never any conversation with 'ordinary' North Korean citizens. Yet through contact with defectors to the South, Demick was able to paint a picture of life in North Korea. Just as the title of the book suggests, life in the last remaining bona fide Communist state is nothing much to envy.

Demick bases her account around the lives of defectors from the city of Chongjin. Despite being North Korea's third largest city, Chongjin could not be more different from the 'showcase' capital of Pyongyang. Situated on the north east coast, Chongjin is a bleak industrialised city characterised by sterile buildings associated with the rest of North Korea, but also subject to harsh weather. Demick chose Chongjin as a case study for a number of reasons. Despite being a major city Chongjin is almost entirely closed to foreigners. Demick believed that by concentrating her research in one place she would be able to verify facts more easily. Chongjin was also amongst the hardest hit by the famine of the mid/late 1990s.

With Chongjin established as the main setting the book falls into three parts. The first section covers life in North Korea from immediately after the war with the South until the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994. Throughout this period the cult of personality that continues to this day was cultivated. Both Kim Il-sung and eventually Kim Jong-il are portrayed as god-like figures that dispense information and advice that purports to make North Korea the model socialist state. Indeed many of the defectors interviewed initially followed state ideology without question. The book introduces Mrs Song, a woman so committed to North Korea that she could almost be the heroine of a propaganda film. Through such characters the book outlines how everyday life was regimented in North Korea. One such device is the inmiban, a neighbourhood organisation who passed information on to the State.

To say that North Korea has a network of informants akin to East Germany is perhaps unsurprising. Instead the most interesting feature of the first section of the book is that North Korea has a class system more akin to India than former Communist allies. In 1958 Kim Il-sung ordered a project to categorise all North Korean citizens by their political utility. Whilst a similar process was undertaken in China, Kim Il-sung's project also drew upon a class structure more associated with Confucianism. North Korean society was first placed into 51 categories that

were eventually lumped into a core, wavering or hostile class. Categorisation determined access to higher education, career options and marital opportunities. For what was to come it was often the difference between life and death.

Part two of the book outlines how North Korea lost its Communist allies in the post-Cold War world before descending into famine. As is to be expected this section is nothing short of harrowing. At the peak of the famine Western media was full of stories of dead bodies by the side of the road, North Koreans foraging for scraps of food and even rumours of cannibalism. In this respect Demick's study offers nothing new. As everyday staples disappeared many resorted to eating grass and weeds. Malnutrition devastated families and led to the homeless wandering throughout North Korea searching for their next meal. Instead the defectors give a voice to the famine that was previously unheard in the West. The defectors' responses ranged from criminal activities to the development of a rudimentary free market economy. At every opportunity the regime's response was brutal and designed to return North Korea to its own brand of socialism.

Yet the famine combined with international isolation to ensure that very little in North Korea actually worked. North Korea became a land of power cuts where rail journeys took weeks rather than days and factories laid idle. Instead of dispensing free health care, many doctors resorted to providing natural remedies. Not only did the country's infrastructure collapse many North Koreans also began to question the validity of their political system. As the famine progressed many returned to the illicit economic activities which earned them prison sentences within North Korea's network of Gulags. Those interviewed by Demick also chose a much more dangerous option.

The final part of the book is perhaps the most enlightening. Whilst escaping to China across the Tumen River is dangerous in itself, defection to South Korea is also problematic. China cannot guarantee a safe passage to the South for North Korean refugees. Indeed North Korea has deployed agents within parts of China to identify defectors. This has prompted such drastic measures as obtaining stolen passports to crossing the Gobi Desert into a more tolerant Mongolia. Yet some of the greatest problems occur upon arrival in the South.

Despite sharing a common language and heritage, over sixty years of separation has placed North and South Korea poles apart. Demick's book ends by highlighting the problems many defectors face in adjusting to life in the South. As customs have changed and qualifications became useless, many North Koreans were initially disoriented by life in the South. Highly-qualified North Koreans have resorted to delivery jobs and other less than desirable professions. Whilst returning is out of the question many hope for a time when they can cross the border and make a difference to life in the North. Despite many North Koreans eventually settling into life in the South, the book ends with a degree of uncertainty. The regime of the ailing Kim Jong-il survived the famine and North Korea remains unreceptive to global opinion. Going home might be some way off.

Nothing to envy earned Barbara Demick this year's Samuel Johnson Prize for non-Fiction, and deservedly so. In this respect concentrating on the lives of defectors from Chongjin paid dividends. The book is well-structured and allows the individual stories to develop in line with

events. Whilst complete verification of each defector's story is almost impossible to obtain Demick has crafted one of the most credible accounts of the grim reality of North Korea. Both Demick's writing and the words of the defectors are direct and to the point. It is tempting to think that the overall harshness of life in North Korea was particularly influential upon the narrative.