



WRITING A BOOK ABOUT AN EVENT AS TERRIBLE AS A FAMINE is not an easy task. Writing it as current history is unfolding complicates the task even more. This book on the North Korean famine of 1995–99 should be written a decade or two from now, if by then the character of the North Korea regime has changed. Only then will scholars and analysts have more complete information about what happened. Most of the lasting works on great famines were written well after the events they record. Cecil Woodham-Smith wrote her extraordinary history of the Irish potato famine more than one hundred years after it ended. Robert Conquest wrote his chronicle of Joseph Stalin's forced collectivization of Ukraine fifty-five years after it was over. And Jasper Becker wrote his account of the Chinese famine forty years after the Great Leap Forward. Undoubtedly some more authoritative work on the North Korean famine will be written at some point in the future, but I did not want to wait. The story needs to be told now. Political and economic conditions have not much changed, and although the famine ended by mid-1998, it could recur. The political and security consequences of the famine will be felt for decades. It is better to look at these recent events now, even without knowing the full story, if doing so could have the effect of improving future policy responses toward North Korea or other countries in similar circumstances.

While I was conducting initial research for this manuscript in 1997 and 1998, refugees were streaming across the border into China to escape the catastrophe. Newly dug mass graves for the victims lined the mountainsides. Gangs of abandoned children orphaned by the famine roamed

city streets in search of food. And a destitute class of human refuse wandered the streets of the large cities, impoverished by the famine. My task was complicated by my own participation in the events I have recorded, as I worked for one of the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that responded to the famine both through advocacy efforts aimed at changing U.S. government policy and by designing programs to assist the victims. For two years I sat through countless meetings on North Korea that took place in Congress, in the executive branch, at United Nations (UN) agencies, and among my NGO colleagues. I have tried to detach myself from the events I am writing about, but I know that detachment may not be entirely possible. Having worked as a relief manager in most of the famines of the 1990s, and having seen them up close, I know what they are about. Nothing can prepare the Western mind for the scenes associated with famines; few Westerners can fully comprehend the absolute terror the very word engenders in countries that have been ravaged by them.

When Jasper Becker interviewed survivors of the Chinese famine of 1958–62, which killed 30 million people, he later described the terrible sadness in their faces—even though the famine had occurred forty years earlier. The consequences of famine in Bangladesh may be observed by the words used in Bengali to describe their nuanced severity. *Akal* describes bad times in which food is scarce, *durvickha* describes a food crisis in which alms are scarce, and *mananthor* describes an event of epoch-changing magnitude against which other historical events are measured in the collective memory of the survivors—a great famine.¹ Traditional societies often measure time by its proximity to or distance from such famines. People in these societies, who do not otherwise know the year of their birth, can describe with great precision their age at the time of a great famine because its horrors were so terrible.²

For the North Korean people, what occurred between 1995 and 1999 was a great famine. Used in this context, however, the word “great” has no nobility attached to it; rather, it describes an event that will scar its survivors for the remainder of their lives.

During the occupation, the German army stripped Greece of its food supply—inadequate in a good year but well below normal because of the disruption of the German invasion—to provision General Erwin Rommel’s army in North Africa. The famine that followed between 1941 and 1943 killed 500,000 Greeks. One of the victims was my father’s uncle,

Demetrios Karadimas. A village doctor found his emaciated body in a field, where he had apparently been trying to eat grass to survive. He was buried in a mass grave, one of the dark motifs of famines across the centuries. While I was growing up, my father more than once told me the story of his uncle's death and of the terrible suffering in Greece during famine. Famines are woven indelibly into the fabric of family history as well.

It is fashionable today, in an effort to minimize or dismiss great events, to engage in intellectual deconstruction when dealing with any sacred subject. One school of famine deconstruction argues that people die all the time, and in poor countries sometimes quite prematurely, even without famines. This argument, which is generally made by people who have never been through famines, trivializes them. Premature deaths are tragic anywhere but deaths from famine are a different matter. During famines, entire families are completely wiped out; whole villages and city neighborhoods are deserted because everyone has died or moved to escape certain death. Only genocide, perhaps, resembles famine in the panic and terror that its approach engenders, and in the pain and disfigurement it inflicts on its victims. Genocide, however, can be perpetrated relatively quickly; starving takes a very long and painful time. The Rwandan genocide was over in five months; the North Korean famine wreaked its havoc over four long and horrifying years.

In writing each page of this book I have kept the political and military context of the famine constantly in mind. Having served on active duty as an officer in the Persian Gulf War and in a state legislature for a dozen years, I recognize that both political and military perspectives are important. The grave dangers posed by the unpredictable behavior of North Korea toward South Korea, the U.S. troops there, and the region generally must not be trivialized. Pyongyang's behavior was and is a real and present danger, despite the recent rapprochement between North and South, but it should never be taken out of an overall moral framework constraining policy. Political and military issues have dominated the debate over how to deal with North Korea, as indeed they should. In the 1990s, however, the humanitarian imperative was given short shrift at a terrible cost in lives, as diplomats and military officers misunderstood the trauma through which the country was passing. More important, political and military analysis devoid of a real understanding of the consequences of a great famine may produce deeply flawed policy.

North Korea holds the distinction, even compared to its former Eastern bloc allies, of being the most controlled and reclusive society on earth. This is one reason why it was so difficult to see physical evidence of the famine. Discerning what was actually happening in such a society was no easy matter. Visual observations by humanitarian aid workers who visited or worked in the country formed the basis of much of the reporting on the famine. Although those visits provided important anecdotal information, neither they nor the data provided by the North Korean government about the food situation constitute conclusive evidence of anything, for they presented conditions as the central authorities wished them to appear to the outside world rather than as they were.

Famines can be observed through at least five different lenses, but two have unfortunately nearly completely dominated contemporary analysis, not just of the North Korean crisis but of most other famines as well. I say “unfortunately” because these two lenses—aggregated agricultural production figures and public health measurements of malnutrition, morbidity, and mortality—were those least useful in analyzing a totalitarian system that exercised nearly complete control over its population. This control distorted or obscured the view of what was really happening in North Korean society. Yet those two lenses are the ones through which humanitarian agencies and donor governments often viewed the North Korean famine.

I have chosen to analyze the North Korean famine using three other lenses that are much more appropriate to the context. The first of these tools of famine analysis, called famine indicators, involves observation of the subtle behavior of the population to cope with their diminishing access to food, which threatens their survival. The North Korean regime did not understand that the appearance of these indicators, some proudly advertised by the central government, were *de facto* evidence of the presence of famine. I have taken advantage of the regime’s ignorance.

The second tool is the analytical model developed by the great Indian economist of famine, Amartya Sen, who argued that famines are caused by an unfavorable relationship between a family’s income and resources and the price of food on the markets. According to Sen’s model, which won him the Nobel Prize for economics, if a family’s ability to purchase or grow food declines rapidly at the same time that food prices increase dramatically on markets, the family will eventually starve.

The third tool I employ to observe the famine is political analysis. All famines occur in a political context. Some government nearly always presides over the crisis—it may exacerbate or even cause the famine, perhaps to rid itself of some unwanted population; it may instead be paralyzed and unable to act; or it may make decisions that unintentionally transform a modest shortage into a catastrophe. The political objectives of the state just before and during a famine determine its outcome, and thus to understand the famine fully these objectives must also be studied.

In addition to using these five lenses, this book examines the famine's historical context, the testimony of its survivors, the role of great-power diplomacy, the political crisis within North Korea, the perspective of humanitarian aid agencies, and the reaction within the United States. My goal in doing so is to provide an extraordinarily complex account that emphasizes the tragedy's many layers.

My introduction to North Korea came because of my position in World Vision and as cochairman of the Disaster Response Committee at InterAction. One of the largest NGOs in the world, World Vision was founded in Korea just as the war began in 1950; InterAction is a consortium of 150 U.S.-based NGOs working in the developing world. Perhaps the richest source of information for this book has come from nearly one thousand messages I received over the InterAction e-mail network during the three-year period from 1996 through 1998. These messages concerned my work in World Vision and with other NGOs working in North Korea. Many of these e-mails were shared in confidence, and their public disclosure would likely embarrass their authors and anger the North Korean government. The North Koreans were so concerned about NGOs exchanging information with one another about what they saw that government officials reportedly insisted on agreements with some NGOs prohibiting this exchange. I have used these e-mails as background information to ensure that my theories and time lines are accurate, but I have not violated the confidence of the organizations that produced them; I quote from the messages only if I have received consent for their use. Some NGO reports are quoted directly, but, to protect their authors from potential retribution, unless they were public documents to begin with, I have omitted their specific source.

Nine other sources provide valuable anecdotal and empirical evidence about North Korea's food crisis: Scott Snyder's United States

Institute of Peace Special Reports, *A Coming Crisis on the Korean Peninsula?* and *North Korea's Decline and China's Strategic Dilemmas*; defector interviews; books and public statements of the preeminent defector Hwang Jong Yop, including *North Korea: Truth or Lies?* and *Theses*; research by scholars of North Korea; four studies based on refugee interviews (two large surveys and two smaller NGO surveys); U.S. newspaper interviews with refugees in China, particularly the February 11, 1999, articles by John Pomfret of the *Washington Post*; interviews with Korean Chinese and Han Chinese who have traveled into North Korea as merchants or to visit relatives; official North Korean government documents and publications, no matter how contrived the documents are; and the speeches of Kim Jong Il, particularly a December 1996 speech that provides exceptional insight into the dynamics of the famine. I visited North Korea in June 1997 and the Chinese border with North Korea in September 1998 and interviewed twenty food refugees and merchants. I interviewed twenty-three staff members of the UN World Food Program and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, as well as staff of foreign policy agencies of the U.S. government. Many asked that our interviews be kept in confidence because of the sensitivity of what they shared with me, a confidence I have respected unless they agreed to full disclosure.

Two journalists stand out among those who reported on the famine. Jasper Becker, a British journalist and reporter for the *South China Morning Post* stationed in Beijing, wrote twenty articles over a four-and-a-half-year period based on interviews with dozens of food refugees, border officials, and merchants. He provided the most in-depth reporting on what was happening, in part because his border reports were informed by his own research and writing on the Chinese famine of 1958–62, contained in his book *Hungry Ghosts*. The photographic and written accounts of the famine by Hilary Mackenzie, a Canadian journalist with unusual internal access, also provide a powerful description of the tragedy.

I have attempted to cross-check information from at least three independent sources before concluding it is true. All these sources, taken exclusively, have limitations, but combined and woven together they provide a reasonably accurate record of what has happened.

One source—the refugee interviews mentioned earlier—stands out above all others and has allowed a glimpse into the terrible pathology of the famine and its impact on people and their communities. The

refugees painfully describe conditions in their home villages and neighborhoods, deaths in their families and *bans* (the lowest unit of Korean society, equivalent to twenty to forty families), and their journeys to China. They recount the deaths of their companions along the way, the separation of parents and children in the chaos of their movement, their capture at the border, and their imprisonment and escape. These accounts are by far the richest and most powerful of my sources. One should be skeptical about their estimates of total deaths for large cities, about self-diagnosis of disease epidemics they report, and about whether their remarkably blunt and angry political views represent general opinion in the country. Unless the refugees were public officials or medical doctors in a position to gather the data they present, the accuracy of their information cannot be confirmed. Their testimony on what they and their families experienced, however, including what happened in their own villages and neighborhoods, what they themselves witnessed, and how they survived—testimony that unmistakably parallels the historical pattern of other famines—must be taken seriously, particularly since 2,300 of these accounts exist.

One British reporter interviewed me in January 1999 about the famine and my experience on the Chinese border, asking probing questions with a slight air of doubt in her voice. At the conclusion of the interview she admitted to me that she had been deeply skeptical of these border reports until she traveled there and interviewed refugees herself. She was shocked by what she heard, but she believed the testimony. She had no doubt there was a terrible famine under way. Since my own trip to North Korea in June 1997, I have argued with my NGO and UN colleagues that it is impossible to get a complete picture of the famine from information taken inside the country. One must travel across the border to confront its terrifying face. I am convinced that no account of what happened between 1995 and 1999 in North Korea can be accurate or authoritative without considering the evidence from the food refugees, corroborated by defector information.

The description of the famine in this book takes a very different view of North Korea than most scholarship, because it looks up from the murky and often unseen bottom of society through to the top. It is ultimately written from a grassroots perspective, whereas most books—regardless of their focus—view North Korea from the top down and are written

from the elite level. Perhaps the single exception to this is Robert A. Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee's *Communism in Korea*, which makes extensive use of defector testimony. Both views are certainly needed; what happens at the bottom affects what is going on in Pyongyang, even if it is difficult for outsiders to discern and even though this totalitarian society holds the entire population captive. Totalitarian regimes—mindful, perhaps, of how most of these regimes ended in the twentieth century—fear their own people more than outsiders may understand.

This book is not primarily an account of the international aid effort to end the famine; however, a full understanding of why the famine occurred and how it ended is impossible without understanding the humanitarian mistakes made in responding to it and how diplomatic interests exacerbated these mistakes.

For his assistance to me while I researched this book, I am indebted to the Venerable Pomnyun, a South Korean Buddhist monk. Pomnyun founded an NGO, the Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement (KBSM), which works along the Chinese border with North Korea collecting information from refugees and helping them to survive their ordeal. From the summer of 1997, Pomnyun led the crusade to draw the attention of a skeptical world and aid community to the severity of the famine. He has been attacked, ridiculed, and harassed in his own country; ignored in Europe; and greeted with polite skepticism in Washington. Pomnyun refused to give up, though, and he stubbornly continued his courageous work. As with most pioneers, he was finally successful through sheer persistence; he knew he was right even if others would not listen initially. He was my host and guide along the border region in September 1998, at considerable personal risk to himself and the KBSM staff. We tirelessly debated our respective theories about the famine and reached some agreement on some central findings. Pomnyun will undoubtedly disagree with some of the political judgments I express here, and he bears no responsibility for them. He has been patient with my unending and sometimes overly aggressive questions, as well as with our debates about what was really happening. Without the information he and his staff collected on the border, I would not have been able to create the many layers of evidence necessary to confirm some of my findings. I have come to know people of many different religious faiths in my decades of relief work

across the globe, but Pomnyun is the first Buddhist I can count among my good friends and colleagues. He is an extraordinary symbol of his faith.

I also have many other individuals to thank for their support and assistance. I thank Bob Seiple and Ken Casey, president and senior vice president, respectively, of World Vision during my time there, for their support and leadership in the NGO advocacy effort. Dick Solomon, Sally Blair, Bill Drennan, Patrick Cronin, Joe Klaitz, Scott Snyder, and Young Chung, my research assistant, were friends and colleagues at the United States Institute of Peace, which supported my research and writing. Professor Youngsuk Park of Boston University deserves thanks for her painstaking translations of KBSM refugee interviews. Davis Bookhart, from Tufts University's Feinstein International Famine Center, and Kate Almquist, who has been my chief of staff in several jobs, helped me with the footnotes and references. Don Oberdorfer and Nicholas Eberstadt read the initial manuscript and made many helpful suggestions. I would like to thank Nigel Quinney, the United States Institute of Peace editor whose persistence and critical comment improved the manuscript. Many of my friends and colleagues at World Vision and in the NGO community in general will undoubtedly disagree with some of my research and findings. My views were not the norm in the NGO community, and certainly what I have written does not reflect World Vision or NGO views on the North Korean crisis. The great risk of my candor in this book may be more harassment and obstruction by the North Korean government for UN agencies and NGOs trying to help address the crisis in that country. I thought the risk less compelling than the terrible facts of what happened, and I therefore determined that the events needed to be recorded to instruct responses to other famines.

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