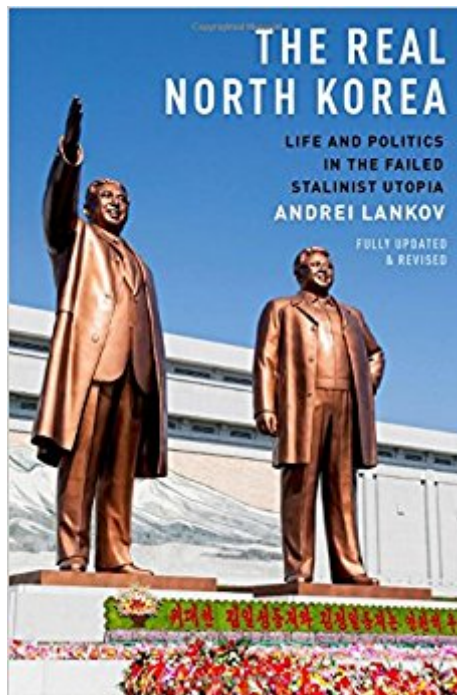


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# The Real North Korea: Life And Politics In The Failed Stalinist Utopia



## Synopsis

Andrei Lankov has gone where few outsiders have ever been. A native of the former Soviet Union, he lived as an exchange student in North Korea in the 1980s. He has studied it for his entire career, using his fluency in Korean and personal contacts to build a rich, nuanced understanding. In *The Real North Korea*, Lankov substitutes cold, clear analysis for the overheated rhetoric surrounding this opaque police state. After providing an accessible history of the nation, he turns his focus to what North Korea is, what its leadership thinks, and how its people cope with living in such an oppressive and poor place. He argues that North Korea is not irrational, and nothing shows this better than its continuing survival against all odds. A living political fossil, it clings to existence in the face of limited resources and a zombie economy, manipulating great powers despite its weakness. Its leaders are not ideological zealots or madmen, but perhaps the best practitioners of Machiavellian politics that can be found in the modern world. Even though they preside over a failed state, they have successfully used diplomacy-including nuclear threats-to extract support from other nations. But while the people in charge have been ruthless and successful in holding on to power, Lankov goes on to argue that this cannot continue forever, since the old system is slowly falling apart. In the long run, with or without reform, the regime is unsustainable. Lankov contends that reforms, if attempted, will trigger a dramatic implosion of the regime. They will not prolong its existence. Based on vast expertise, this book reveals how average North Koreans live, how their leaders rule, and how both survive.

## Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; Upd Rev edition (December 22, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199390037

ISBN-13: 978-0199390038

Product Dimensions: 9.2 x 1 x 6.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 107 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #37,313 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #17 in Æ Books > History > Asia > Korea > North #28 in Æ Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Asia #32 in Æ Books > Law > Legal Theory & Systems > Non-US Legal Systems

## Customer Reviews

"[A] probing, clear-eyed study of the world's most irascible dictatorship. Lankov's is one of the best and most accessible recent accounts of this seemingly outlandish nation, and the book eschews North Korea's lurid stereotypes to reveal a stunted normalcy." -Publishers Weekly (Starred Review)

"The Real North Korea is one of the best books about this isolated republic to appear in years. Andrei Lankov draws on three decades of experience to write a deeply informed, thoughtful, fair-minded and highly readable account of 'life and politics' in North Korea, from day one to the present. His policy recommendations for dealing with the nuclear problem, for a South Korea waiting impatiently to inherit the North, and for the eventual end of this regime as we know it, are cogent and full of something rare in discussions about this irascible country: common sense." -Bruce Cumings, Chair of the History Department at the University of Chicago, and author of *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*

"Lankov explains how North Korea's survival imperative combined with South Korea's success compels the regime to persist in internally rational but self-isolating behavior that only further deepens its quandary. North Korea is the Galapagos Island of nation states, and Lankov provides clear analysis of how the regime has survived despite steep odds, why the leadership cannot change, and why it must." -Scott Snyder, Senior Fellow for Korea Studies and Director of the Program on U.S.-Korea Policy, The Council on Foreign Relations

"The Real North Korea presents a detailed and careful analysis of a country that has been difficult for many to understand. Andrei Lankov, one of the world's top North Korea scholars, provides a fascinating look at the internal dynamics and motivations that drive North Korea. Few scholars of North Korea have the experience and insight of Andrei Lankov, and this book will be required reading for all who wish to better understand the actions of the DPRK." -Terence Roehrig, Professor in National Security Affairs and Director of the Asia-Pacific Studies Group at the U.S. Naval War College and author of *Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. Nuclear Umbrella*

"Lankov offers a highly readable book and a unique perspective that yields a knowledgeable, sardonic, acerbic and not entirely dispassionate view of North Korea. The author also dishes up a rare treat, mostly unfound in books of this genre: common sense and humility about the North's future, a theme from beginning to end." --National Interest

"Andrei Lankov has written a wonderful introduction to North Korean history and North Korean studies in *The Real North Korea*. Historians and researchers in other specialties -- particularly involving the history of the Communist world -- will find it a good introduction to the peculiarities of North Korea. Policymakers and staffers in Washington will find a sober-minded, realistic, and -- given the author's personal background as a Soviet academic -- very different take on North Korea than the standard media line. Highly recommended." --History News Network

"The book, an engaging blend of scholarship, reportage and memoir, offers striking details about daily life

in a country reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984." -- The New York Times Book Review (Editor's Choice)"The book has the feel of a particularly fascinating college class taught by an elbow-patched luminary. The syllabus ranges from labor camps to nuclear diplomacy...offering both the academic consensus and Lankov's take...Readers will come away with a solid understanding of what's happening in North Korea and why. Lankov illuminates large patches of that North Korea-shaped black hole." --The Washington Post

Andrei Lankov is Professor of History at Kookmin University in Seoul, South Korea. A native of Leningrad, he studied in North Korea as an exchange student. His books include *North of the DMZ: Essays on Daily Life in North Korea*, and *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960*.

. For anyone interested in the history and politics of North Korea, this is an essential read. Andrei Lankov is an expert, in the best sense of that word, on the history, culture, and politics of this rogue nation. He has lived in N. Korea, and has experienced it both first hand and at a distance, as a cultural and political analyst. His prose is clear and convincing, his arguments both analytic and sensitive. Lankov explains how N. Korea took an increasingly extreme path in the form of Communist dictatorship, even after its allies, Russia and later China, opened up to a modified capitalist economic model. He describes the early economic success of the Kim family regime in the North, and how, over decades, what was viewed as an initial success story has deteriorated into a failed, petty dictatorship. (My observation: The cultural value structure of the Kim family regime is reminiscent of the decadent, pre-Japanese, almost medieval Yi dynasty.) Lankov documents the N. Korean strategy of "aid-maximizing" through diplomacy and blackmail, and their persistent nuclear threat has served that end. Despite the egalitarian rhetoric of Communism, and of the Kim regime, a form of indentured servitude has become the lot of most North Koreans. With the growing lack of substantial agricultural and manufacturing productivity, rations stopped being delivered to workers in the mid-1990s. Thus, the Korean population has resorted to individual enterprise and black-market economics, which the regime forcefully suppresses from time to time. Still, these seem to be essential survival strategies for the malnourished population, and officials are complicit. The whole political and social structure seems to be a web-work of lies and deceit. Efforts at currency reform have been disastrous. At the turn of the millennium (during the two years I was in South Korea), there was a relative thaw in tensions between North and South. An industrial zone near the border of the two countries, funded by the South and employing workers from the North, was one positive

outcome of that thaw. For years, outsiders have hoped that reforms such as those that changed China, might happen in North Korea, as well. In the end, the author seems doubtful that such a relatively peaceful reform would be possible, since those in power stand to lose privilege and power were that to happen. Lankov admits that "the current system is both unsustainable and unreformable," and he predicts that North Korea will end in a dramatic crisis. He offers several possible scenarios on how that might go down. But, he admits, "[T]he greater the gap between the North and its neighbors--above all South Korea--the greater the potential for a future explosion." And this is what everybody in the West fears, because Seoul is so close to the North. Still, Lankov sees political unification of the Korean peninsula as a distinct possibility, and he has a chapter in which he provides rational and humane guidelines for a best-case scenario. I pray that something like his sanity can prevail after the crisis of North Korean collapse. Let us hope that this small peninsula will not become the tinderbox that sets off WWII.

I read this book to gain insight into North Korea for an upcoming novel I'm writing. It didn't just inform me about North Korea, it made me sympathize deeply with the North Korean people (and I don't mean it made me a supporter of the Kim's or the terribly inefficient government that has destroyed the freedom of its people) . Andrei Lankov shares expertly from his own experience of what living behind the curtain is like, painting an eye-opening picture as to why the regime operates the way it does and how Western countries can safely help in accelerating its inevitable fall. It is well worth a read, you won't see North Korea the same afterwards.

I agree with the generally positive comments this book has received here and elsewhere. Anyone looking for an up-to-date and trenchant analysis of North Korea would be very well served by this volume. My criticism is directed at Oxford University Press for their truly incompetent editing. I don't think there is a single paragraph that does not contain some grammatical error or stylistic howler--subject-verb disagreement, confused tenses, wrong use of articles, garbled syntax, you name it. I'm amazed that a house of OUP's reputation should let a sloppy job like this out its doors. And this isn't just carping grammarianism on my part. The mistakes are so egregious and frequent that they detract from the author's otherwise solid analysis and arguments. The fact that Mr. Lankov is not a native English speaker is not the issue. It was his publisher's job to clean up his prose and make him look better than he does here. In this, the chief responsibility of any publisher to an author appearing under their name, Oxford failed Mr. Lankov miserably.

I'm pretty sure the information in this book is largely spot on because; most everything I read about North Korea is effectively the same. There are slight variations but in effect the experiences shared by the different are largely the same. That said North Korea is the craziest place on Earth. If I hadn't known North Korea really exists, I'd swear the stories I hear about its government, its rulers and its history are the weird over the top fantasy of a kind found in Barbarella Queen of the Galaxy or (Brazil the campy Orwellian movie not the country)The books read almost like spy novels because; every aspect of life in North Korea reads like a James Bond thriller without any of the lavish accompaniments. You must learn spy craft just to live in North Korea because anything that does not revolve tightly around the Little Father Angel Darling Sweethearts or whatever the Fearless Leader of North Korea is called today is treason. For all my lite hearted flippant talk about this book it is compelling and sad to hear of so much suffering by just plain common folk in North Korea. Hearing of people starving to death hurts my heart to a point words can explain. Hearing of people so starved that they don't stand because doing so burns to much energy saddens me greatly.The really terrible thing is in the face of such horrid suffering we in the west are powerless to help North Korea working people because; the government would use whatever it saves to build Atomic bombs. North Korean communism is not the new communism lite like practiced in China and Vietnam. North Korean communism is full on Brutal Stalinist micromanagement personality cult communism that punishes you if you don't clean the portraits of the North Korean fearless leader angel darling sweethearts past and present.

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