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Andrei Lankov has done a great service to those who are interested in North Korea with his research and writing on the hidden 1954-1955 famine. The existence of this famine, so long unknown to the outside world, is testament to the remarkable degree of the control over information that was exercised by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Lankov has used Soviet and Eastern bloc archives which were opened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and which have been virtually untouched by other scholars. This is one of a very few articles written on the subject.¹

Lankov describes some of the causes of 1954-55 famine. One key element was the destruction of the DPRK's industrial infrastructure during the Korean War, which made the country dependent on agriculture as its principal source of income. Pyongyang then imposed the forced collectivization of farms, which was the immediate cause of the famine. North Korea adopted a Stalinist system of food control to feed the country, where the population received twice-monthly rations through the state controlled Public Distribution System (PDS). The PDS bought grain from the collective farms at heavily discounted prices, and then sold it to workers at higher prices, although below market levels. This system had several severe weaknesses, one of which was that local authorities in Marxist systems regularly exaggerated the size of the harvests. In the case of North Korea in 1954-55 local officials exaggerated the harvest by 50-70%. Since Pyongyang thought much more grain had been harvested than was actually the case, it badly underestimated how much farmers would have to eat once the state had claimed its share. This problem was compounded by farmers slaughtering their cattle and pigs as a reaction to the forced collectivization rather than give them up to the collective farms. This reduced available protein in people's diet in subsequent years. Historically, North Korea has blamed bad weather, which was a factor in 1954 and the mid-1990s, for its food crises, but it was not the real cause of either famine. Ultimately, forced collectivization – which also caused major famines in other Communist countries such as Ukraine (1930-34) and China (1958-1962) -- was the real culprit.

Given the Soviet experience with the Ukrainian famine, it should not have come as a surprise to Pyongyang that forced collectivization would turn out badly. Famine response experts use what are called pre-famine indicators to predict impending famine. One of these indicators is rising food prices compared to wages. When wages are static and food prices jump dramatically over a short period of time, a food crisis often results. Lankov reports that rice prices in DPRK markets increased ten-fold between 1954 and 1955, but wages remained flat. Rice cost 40-50 won before the crisis but rose in a year to 400 won (9). This in and of itself should have been a warning sign to Pyongyang of an impending nutritional catastrophe.

Apparently the North Korean government learned very little from the earlier famine. In 1994-98, the country experienced a second major famine. Hwang Jang-yop, the third highest ranking member of the DPRK Politburo who defected to South

¹ Balazs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953–1964* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) is the first detailed description of the famine.

Korea in January 1997, reports the famine killed 2.8 million people. Hwang wrote in an essay *The Problems of Human Rights in North Korea*:

“That more than 1.5 million people died of hunger from 1995 to 1996 is an irrefutable fact. We do not have accurate data about the situation from 1997 to 1998, but since the food supply did not improved [sic] much, it can be deduced that at least a million people have met their deaths every year. According to reports that Chinese telecommunications company Xinhua claims it received from officials of the Agricultural Committee in North Korea, a total of 2.8 million people have starved to death at last count at the end of 1997.”²

Lankov argues that the 1954-1955 famine was less severe than the later one in the 1990's, but he could not find much archival mortality data to confirm this finding. However, he does quote the East German Ambassador to North Korea, Richard Fischer, who reported that about 25% of the children had died (he did not define 'child, 10). The population of the North was 7.7 million in 1954, of which 3.5 million were between 0-14 years old.³ A death rate of twenty five percent applied against 3.5 million children would be 850,000 deaths. If the 25% is applied against a more limited definition of children, say between 0-7 years, rather than 0-14 years, the death rate would be on the order of 400,000 of children's deaths. This would not include the deaths of elderly and infirm people, pregnant and lactating mothers (who are also vulnerable because they are providing nutrition to two people), and of the most destitute, which would probably double that number. With 800,000 deaths out of a population of 7.7 million, it would mean more than 10% of the country perished, thus making it proportionately as severe as the 1990's famine.

Lankov quotes a North Korean official (later purged by Kim Il-sung) who stated that 27% farmers were malnourished in 1952, two years before the famine (6). Depending on how “malnourished” is defined (moderate or severe acute), this gives strong support to the argument that there was a high death toll in the 1954-55 famine. Most deaths in famines are immediately attributable to infectious disease rather than actual starvation, because people's immune systems are compromised by their acute severe malnutrition and wasting. In most famines, children under seven die at a disproportionate rate of all age cohorts because their immune systems are not fully developed. If they come from destitute families and are malnourished at the beginning of a famine, they die at much higher rates. If the pre-famine malnutrition rate among adult farmers was 27%, then North Korea could well have experienced a severe famine in 1954-1955.⁴

In my book the *Great North Korean Famine* I argue that one of the defining characteristics of the North Korean famines is that the coping mechanisms people use to survive are illegal, which is probably why famines in totalitarian countries involve such high death rates compared to historic famines in simple authoritarian systems.⁵ These traditional coping mechanisms include exchanging one's own labor to buy food, trading farm animals for the lowest cost calories, and migrating from the epicenter of a famine to regions with more food, all of which the government refused to permit. However, in both famines, Pyongyang did not enforce rules which prohibited grain from being sold in the markets. This was probably because the PDS had collapsed and thus the population had to fend for itself if it was to survive.

² “The Problems of Human Rights in North Korea”, Hwang Jong Yop, <http://www.nknet.org/en/keys/lastkeys/2001/6/05.php>.

³ “Intelligence Memorandum: Population and Manpower of Korea 1954,” 13 September 1954, Central Intelligence Agency Office of Research and Reports. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00935A000300030001-8.pdf> 3

⁴ See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵ See Andrew S. Natsios, *The Great North Korea Famine: Famine, Politics, and Foreign Policy*, (Washington, D.C.: USIP Press, 2001), 88.

In both famines North Korea's food distribution system could not withstand the strain of the food system collapse. In the earlier case, the farmers protested against the famine, sometimes violently. In the latter case, farmers took matters into their own hands and pre-harvested 1.3 million metric tons of corn from the collective farms in early autumn 1996, before it could be harvested for the Public Distribution System. This self-defensive action by farmers took place because the central government had steadily reduced the food ration people were getting, thus creating an incentive for farmers to secretly harvest the corn crop for their own use in order to save their families. This helped collapse the PDS, which was a major factor in the 1990's famine (the elimination of food subsidies from the Soviet Union also contributed). By 1996, the PDS distributions all but stopped, with the exceptions of Pyongyang, the secret police and military officer corps, and workers in critical industries.⁶

Historical narratives on famines suggest that most major food crises and famines have political consequences immediately or over the long term. Riots over the rapid rise of bread prices precipitated the French Revolution. The Irish Potato famine, some scholars argue, led to the Irish independence movement because of the British government's failure to adequately respond to the suffering during the famine.⁷ During the African Sahelian famine in the 1968-1974, coups or coup attempts took place in every country that was suffering from famine except for Senegal.⁸ Marshall Peng Dehuai, Minister of Defense, confronted Chairman Mao Zedong during the Chinese famine and argued that if the starvation deaths continued the loyalty of the army would be at risk given that so many soldier's family members had died.⁹ The Arab uprisings in 2009-2010 were driven in part by food price increases in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. North Korea has been no exception, even if the results have been less readily visible.

Rural famines are not as politically destabilizing as urban famines, because popular uprisings in remote rural areas in a dictatorship are dispersed over a wide area and do not as easily spread as they might in an urban center. The 1954 food crisis in North Korea was a rural famine, while the 1990's famine was centered in cities and thus increased the risk of political consequences. I argue in my book that the 1990's North Korean famine probably led to a coup plot in early autumn 1995, organized by the senior officers of 6th Army Corps whose headquarters was located in Hamhung City, one of the worst famine-affected cities. The coup was discovered by internal security three days after the planning meetings were held and a group of officers were arrested, marched out and shot according to a senior ranking defector I interviewed.¹⁰

We know a great deal about the attitude of the North Korean leadership towards the 1990's famine through a speech given by Kim Jong-il at Kim Jong-il University to party cadres in December 1996. Hwang Jong Yop, President of the University, secretly recorded the speech and then smuggled it out when he defected to South Korea in early 1997. In the speech Kim made 22 references to the "food problem," (a euphemism for the famine), and blames the party cadres, who were the audience for the speech, because of the lack of political education of the masses, which Kim feared could lead to a collapse of popular support for socialism. Kim talked about chaos in the countryside as people began moving in search of food (formerly people required a permit to leave their villages, a system which broke down as the famine progressed). In his speech Kim noted that "the food problem is creating a state of anarchy." What is astonishing is that Kim Jong-il had no plan for dealing with the crisis - which was shaking the foundations of the regime - other than more "political education of the

⁶ Natsios, *The Great North Korea Famine*, 122-123.

⁷ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849* (New York City: Harper, 1962).

⁸ John Osgood Field, *The Challenge of Famine: Recent Experience, Lessons Learned* (Sterling: Kumarian Press, 1993), 23.

⁹ Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine*. (New York City: The Free Press, 1996) 90.

¹⁰ Natsios, *The Great North Korea Famine*, 217.

masses.”¹¹ Kim Jong-il feared regime change would follow any attempts at economic reform which is why he never attempted it. Kim Il-sung postponed the implementation of the forced collectivization in the earlier famine because the Soviets were in such a commanding position, and the DRPK still recovering from the Korean War. But he never took Soviet advice to abandon the Stalinist economic planning model the DPRK was following.

In the case of the 1950's famine, politics was central to what drove an early response. Lankov reports that diplomats from the Soviet Union and other Eastern bloc countries feared there would be uprisings in North Korea even before the famine because of the country's destitution, a fear that grew even more intense during the famine. Such uprisings would not send favorable propaganda messages about the Marxist system to the non-Communist world. Thus, the Soviets had strong interest in addressing the immediate food crisis and long-term economic destitution.

In the 1950's famine, the DPRK asked for food aid from China and the USSR and received it quickly, though not in sufficient volume to make up for the food deficit described by Lankov. However, while China provided food at a 'friendship' price during the 1990's famine, Russia did not because its own economy was near collapse causing Moscow to end its food and oil subsidies precipitously even before the famine occurred (indeed it was one of the casual factors). In the 1990's famine, Kim Jong-il was hostile to international food aid from donor governments (virtually all of which were democracies) because he believed that accepting such aid it would show his government's weakness and vulnerability to its 'enemies' in South Korea, the U.S. and Japan, even though he knew that the food was desperately needed. The food aid became mixed up with the nuclear talks - the U.S. policy in 1997 was to provide food aid only if the North Koreans came to the negotiating table - a complication which did not occur in the 1954 famine.

In fact a large percentage of the North Korean population suffered from destitution before either famine began, which may be one factor that exacerbated both famines. Famine scholar Amartya Sen argues in his classic book *Poverty and Famines* that who dies in famines is more a function of level of destitution of vulnerable people and their inability to grow food, trade for food on markets, obtain food from a social safety net, or work for food, than of the availability of food.¹² Thus the famine deaths of 1954-55 were as much a result of desperately poor conditions among the North Korean people as they were of forced collectivization alone. It is proof of Sen's classic theory of famines.

The most important political consequence of 1950's famine may have been Moscow's souring of support for Kim Il-sung because of his mishandling of the economy. Lankov argues that one of the reasons for Moscow's ultimately unsuccessful attempt in 1956 to replace Kim Il-sung was their concern his rigid Stalinist ideology had retarded economic growth and depressed the population's living standard. Kim ruthlessly purged the North Korean cadres who had sought to remove him; the Soviets later tried to intervene to prevent their execution. North Korea evolved into one of the most repressive and brutal political systems in the Communist world, in part perhaps because Kim feared future attempts to remove him from power from within.

Lankov's article provides a heavily documented analysis from primary sources of the consequences of a famine which we now know have cascaded through the decades of North Korean history. Diplomatic and military planners often view food and famines as humanitarian events rather than the stuff of geopolitics. Lankov's article suggests otherwise, as the famine entered the calculation of the Soviet Union in dealing with its poverty stricken client state. We now know that the DPRK's so called 'food problem' did not start in the 1990's during the famine but has haunted the country from its inception. And may well again.

¹¹ Natsios, *The Great North Korea Famine*, quotations on 231, 136.

¹² See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines*.

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