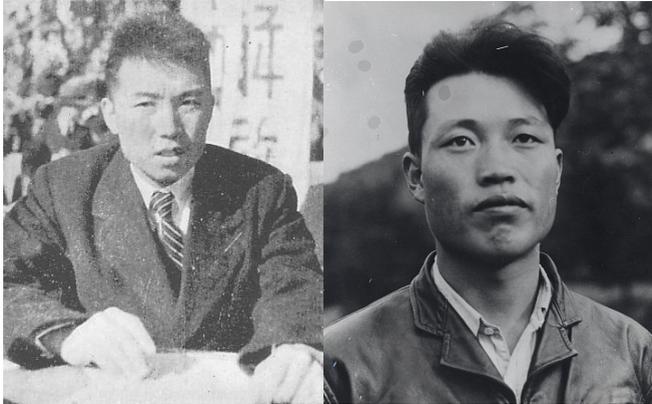


A TALE OF TWO NORTH KOREANS

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Kim Il Sung (1946)

No Kum Sok (1953)

Blaine Harden, *The Great Leader and the Fighter Pilot: The True Story of the Tyrant Who Created North Korea and the Young Lieutenant Who Stole His Way to Freedom* (New York: Viking, 2015); 304 pages; \$27.95.

In *The Great Leader and the Fighter Pilot*, Blaine Harden, the famed author of *Escape from Camp 14*, recounts the first years of the North Korean state through the experiences of Kim Il Sung and No Kum Sok. The stories of the former, the founder of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the latter, a North Korean fighter pilot-turned-defector, remind us of the diverse individuals who sought to navigate the DPRK's first tumultuous years. As Kim triumphed in power struggles at the top and sought to remake North Korea in his own image, No, whose father had worked for the Japanese before August 1945, survived at the bottom by praising communism until he could escape to South Korea.

Benefiting from Harden's deft storytelling, this work succeeds as a popular history that encourages readers to learn more about the creation

of the North Korean state and the immense suffering that resulted from the Korean War. Its focus on No's first-hand account in particular fosters a greater appreciation for the experiences of all Koreans, regardless of their backgrounds, during those heady days. The book's significance in this regard is that it offers the general public a deeper understanding of North Korean history through the eyes of those who lived it. Readers, especially individuals unlikely to take the time to immerse themselves in the vast historiography of the subject, will learn much about the origins of Kim Il Sung's regime and the horrific war that followed its creation. Many will find themselves disturbed by the North Korean leader's ruthless efforts to accumulate power but filled with admiration for No Kum Sok's tenacious survival instincts.

Despite these strengths, Harden's portrayal of Kim Il Sung is often too simplistic. That narrative, a zero-sum depiction of the Not-So-Great Leader, leaves readers wondering if there was anything more to Kim's story than brutal purges and Machiavellian intrigues. The North Korean leader was, as the author notes appropriately, a morally repugnant dictator. But in making that case, Harden doesn't do enough to analyze Kim Il Sung's deeply flawed humanity. Kim was a cruel despot, but he was also a human being, a father, a husband, and a son, who grew into his tyranny over time with unflagging confidence in his vision for Korea's prosperity. That recognition would have offered a more complex story about how one individual created a Stalinist nightmare with seemingly the best of intentions for himself and his people.

Of course, the dictator's life story has received more measured treatment in Dae-Sook Suh's *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* and Bradley K. Martin's *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*, a much-read tome on the Kim clan.¹ For a more succinct overview, one could also look to Andrei Lankov's *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: the Formation of North Korea*.² These works offer a sober assessment of Kim's early years and his ultimate goals for Korea as a communist state.

Regardless, Harden's *The Great Leader and the Fighter Pilot* remains unique as a popular history that contrasts Kim's first years in power with No Kum Sok's experiences at the opposite end of the political and social spectrum. Through their stories, we are allowed a birds-eye view of how two Koreans responded to a dangerous time.

1 Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004).

2 Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 49-77.

Excellent Liars

No Kum Sok was born in 1932 to a privileged existence during the Japanese occupation of Korea. No's father worked for Japan's Noguchi Corporation which built hydroelectric and chemical plants and railroads across the peninsula. His father, however, lost his job after the liberation of northern Korea by Soviet forces and his family had to sell all of their possessions to survive. The subsequent death of No's father from cancer in 1947 and the establishment of the DPRK in 1948 further upended what had once been a tranquil and affluent life.

No, the author states, abhorred Kim Il Sung's government and dreamed of escaping to South Korea, but the young man learned to keep his beliefs to himself and to publicly praise his new communist rulers. By the summer of 1949, No, hoping to avoid slaughter in the North Korean army gained admission to the DPRK's naval academy by lying about his family's privileged background. When war erupted the following year, No watched in horror as US bombers devastated his country, killing countless innocents. Only good fortune allowed him to escape to China in late September 1950 and receive training as a fighter pilot. Emerging as a MiG pilot in the fall of 1951, No quickly found himself battling US jets in the skies above Korea and Manchuria. Neither eager to die for his country nor kill Americans, the young man kept his distance from his adversaries, firing his guns off into the clouds to feign dogfights. When authorities stationed No outside of Pyongyang in September 1953, he promptly defected to South Korea on a training flight. Moving to the United States the following May, No enrolled at the University of Delaware, benefitting from a \$100,000 reward from the US government, before eventually becoming a successful engineer. He lives in Florida to this day.

Kim Il Sung's background, Harden notes, bore little relation to No's. Born in 1912, Kim spent most of his formative years in Manchuria, where his family fled to avoid Japanese imperialism. After Kim's middle school expelled him at age 17 for participating in communist activities, a nine-month stint in jail led the young man to embrace a life of armed struggle. In the mid-1930s, Kim and a small band of fighters, following the lead of Chinese communists, waged a guerilla war against the Japanese in Manchuria before fleeing to the Soviet Union to avoid capture. If the future dictator's military accomplishments were few and far between in these years, Kim—the author notes in quoting the historian Dae-Sook Suh—demonstrated “persistence and obstinate will, characteristic of many successful revolutionaries else-

where, that deserve recognition.”³

After September 1945, the future dictator rose to power in Soviet-occupied Korea by idolizing Joseph Stalin and taking orders from Soviet authorities. In the process, Kim gained influence at the expense of his political rivals, most of whom later faced execution squads. By the spring of 1950, Kim managed to convince both Stalin and Mao Zedong to let him launch an invasion of South Korea. Unimaginable devastation ensued as a result, and only China’s intervention saved Kim Il Sung’s government from extinction. In the years following the war, the North Korean dictator charted an independent path outside the orbit of Moscow and Beijing while playing those allies off one another for much-needed aid. Kim oversaw the reconstruction of his country from the ashes in the process and strengthened the brutal political system that persists there to this day.

Beyond the One-Dimensional Man

While Harden accurately recounts Kim Il Sung’s first years, he often ignores significant questions about the future dictator’s ambitions. For example, when noting that Kim and his guerillas in the mid-1930s used extortion, blackmail, and murder to feed themselves, the author writes, “In Kim’s politics...there was never a question of whether the ends justified the means. He had become a thug with a cause.” But one wonders what Kim’s cause was as a young insurgent. Was it the dream of freeing his homeland from Japanese imperialism or seizing power for himself as an all-powerful ruler? Did Kim’s desire to liberate Korea ever transcend his insatiable desire for self-glorification? A discussion of these intertwined questions—raising the possibility that Kim Il Sung initially sought to achieve something larger than himself—would yield no tidy answers nor excuse his abhorrent behavior. Yet it would offer a far more penetrating analysis of the North Korean leader’s formative years.

In a similar vein, the author’s description of Kim Il Sung’s relationship with Joseph Stalin and Soviet authorities is reductive. The North Korean leader, Harden notes, was a “Soviet poodle” who “swallowed Stalinism whole” with “...slavish imitation.” However, in making these points, the text doesn’t consider the extent to which Kim genuinely believed in the Stalinist economic model for Korea, a system that—despite its abundant horrors—transformed the Soviet Union into an industrialized power during the 1930s.

As a result, Harden again misses an opportunity to offer deeper insights into the budding despot's story: Kim used the Stalinist system to ensure his dominance in North Korea—yes—but he also felt it would lead his country to prosperity; Kim thus came to view his personal leadership, and the implementation of communist policies under his watch, as essential for Korea's development. He ultimately believed in the necessity of his own tyranny. This remains one of the great tragedies of modern Korean history.

Another overarching problem in this text is that the author doesn't acknowledge a central similarity in the stories of No Kum Sok and Kim Il Sung: they both manipulated their environments for the sake of larger goals. For years, No faked the role of a fervent communist, outwitting his superiors by praising the DPRK until he could escape to South Korea. Kim did very much the same thing with Moscow, playing the part of loyal stooge until he could take total control of the DPRK and ensure its independence. In telling that story, the author mocks Kim as a puppet while describing No as an "excellent liar," suggesting that the former surrendered his personal agency while the latter managed to maintain his. The reality, however, is that neither man—despite the profound differences in their moral character—ever lost sight of their personal ambitions. There seems to be a fine line between obsequious puppet and cunning liar.

Despite these shortcomings, Blaine Harden's *The Great Leader and the Fighter Pilot* will enthrall popular audiences and encourage them to learn more about the origins of the DPRK. It is a tale of two North Koreans: one who became a villain without realizing it and another who flew to freedom with dreams of a better life. **Y**