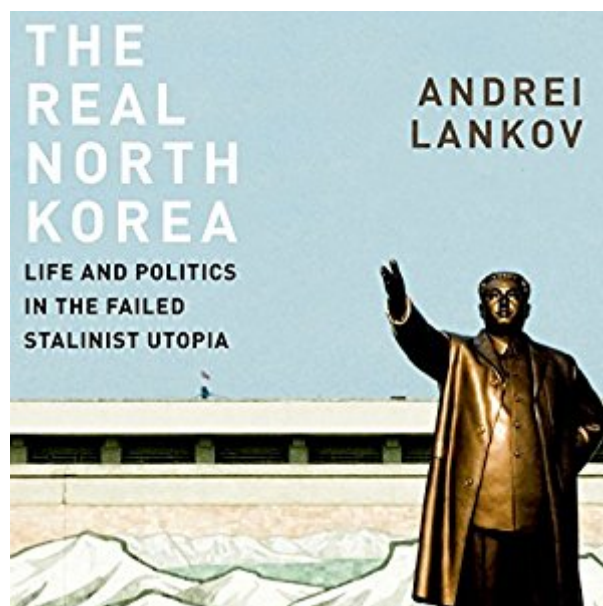


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The Real North Korea: Life And Politics In The Failed Stalinist Utopia



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

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Customer Reviews

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.

This book is the newest, most timely, and the most well-informed book on North Korea that has been published. The author is a scholar with a world reputation living and teaching in Seoul. He speaks fluent Korean and has even lived in the North. Anyone who can't understand the seeming irrationality of the North (and that includes almost everyone including myself) will find this book fascinating and compelling. Lankov argues that the North Korean leadership acts quite rationally. They have in the past been rewarded for their bad behavior by the West and have done a remarkable job in manipulating their enemies for their own benefit. And of course, stirring up troubles outside a country's borders is always an effective tool for stifling internal dissent. The book also includes a history of North Korea that puts their current practices in context. And it reads very well.

There are some good books out there about the Korean peninsula written by professional journalists, historians, and policy wonks. The problem is that while they may be consummate professionals in their respective professions, few are what I'd consider real experts on North Korea. There are a handful that do fit this category, but these precious few seem hesitant to go on the record putting themselves out there to hypothesize and speculate about what may be going on now as well as what both the near and distant future may have in store. Andrei Lankov does just that in this new book. While the main argument of the book is that North Korean leadership is not crazy, but coldly rational and entirely machiavellian, is getting most of the attention, this is old news to anyone relatively well read on the topic. In my opinion, this work's greatest contribution is the presentation of various scenarios for each stage of the inevitable collapse of the regime. Just enough history is

given in the early chapters of the book to give the reader the proper context for understanding the analysis and intel that soon follows. The problem with any North Korea analysis is that the country is so closed off that it can quickly turn into reading tea leaves. Lankov tackles this head-on by taking the reader by hand and explaining this very problem and going into detail as to why he reads the tea leaves the way he does. Lankov doesn't shy away from making predictions of which scenarios he believes are most likely, but he doesn't ignore the possibility that he might be wrong either. Thus, he also walks us through the other possible scenarios and what would happen if things turn out differently from what he expects. A similar approach is taken in regards to analyzing how the other countries are dealing/should deal with North Korea. Finally, several reunification/reconstruction scenarios are given in the same manner. The author has the presence of mind to know that just because he has his favorite path, that's not necessarily the path that will be taken, so other models are not neglected. This is now THE book I will recommend to friends and family that send me panicked emails asking me when I'm coming home every time NK tests a new rocket, or to anyone else interested in knowing what the future may have in store for the Korean peninsula.

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