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An Imperialist in the DPRK

Posted 08 April 2017 by Natasha Louis under [Op-Eds \(http://pgi.nyc/?cat=66\)](http://pgi.nyc/?cat=66)

By Natasha Louis

When asked about my experiences in North Korea, two questions always come up: Why would you want to go there? And, what was it like? As a global affairs student, the first seems easy to answer with a simple, "why not?" But the second, I still stumble in a search for words to explain. There is nothing to compare it to, nor will there ever be a place like it to exist again in our globalized world. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a complicated contrast of beauty and suppressed tragedy. The 'hermit kingdom' has become our world's dark Disneyland.

It would be a mistake to underestimate North Korea and its threats. While yes, they come from an egomaniac who propagates vast amounts of misinformation and wants to be seen as an equal among world leaders, to dismiss these threats as nothing but tantrums is dangerous. The people of North Korea are brainwashed from the beginning and have nothing to counter what they are told. I have looked into the eyes of young children who were forced to perform for us. They showed utter confusion and fear as they looked at me and knew I was American; the enemy pictured throughout their school decapitating and brutally murdering thousands. I saw anger and disgust. And at times I saw a profound sadness I know I will not see again. The type of sadness that is not only contradicted

with a performing smile but a sorrow that they cannot even define or have an answer to what would make them happy. The best example I can point to is featured in the documentary *Under the Sun* where a girl is forced to perform like many of the people we witnessed.

As the only American in my tour group, I was jokingly referred to as 'the imperialist' since that is what we were constantly called by the North Koreans. Make no mistake, it can be understood why other countries would give us such a title given our history. However, the stories depicted in their historical context, even if removed from all biases, were grossly false. But as an imperialist in such a tense situation, I remained mute for my safety. I've been asked many times if I was afraid while there and it is odd to say that for the most part, despite a few close encounters of being arrested, one can become acclimated to such an environment over time. Granted we traveled throughout the country for only a week, it felt like months. As a cynic, I wanted to believe that perhaps we were wrong about the embattled nation.

At all times, you are accompanied by guides and are never allowed to speak to citizens. We were often not permitted to take photographs of civilians or certain areas, an instruction I and other undercover journalists often ignored. Photographs of military or construction sites were strictly prohibited as well, but this is a common occurrence in countries around the world. At times I could buy that this was a rule put in place in order to prevent manipulation by the international media, a concept I can understand more after spending time there. Yet, it was very apparent that they did not want the outside world to see any sense of complications. There was never one slip of a criticism in



any context about life, let alone the government.

Poverty and economic hardship is consistently lied about and often covered up, but is evident once we traveled through the countryside. Crossing countless miles of abandoned farmland, we would occasionally see a few crippled elderly women digging in the dirt, abandoned villages and people trying to fish in dilapidated areas. Further, it was common to see people digging in the grass in the cities, perhaps for insects to eat as I have later read.

The cities are filled with brightly painted buildings in pastel colors, and surprisingly, a decent amount of traffic. But what I found particularly peculiar was where these people were traveling to and from, as these buildings were abandoned. In addition, dancers and students would practice performances outside in the cold, long after the sun had set. They even drove us through a new area of the city entirely dedicated to teachers with large skyscrapers, yet we knew the area was mostly unoccupied. These odd behaviors seemed to reinforce that everything was a show – for us or whoever may be watching – that this was a strong, developed and happy land.

Propaganda is constantly fed to the people in every part of life. Every great contribution to society whether through education, infrastructure or technology is attributed to it being invented or perfected by the Great Leader. While some in our group bought into the propaganda, no matter how many perfected performances we saw or 'proof' of what a powerful nation they are, the mood of melancholy felt constant as we experienced a militarized population that has been taught to never surrender.

Seeing the children who ran to our bus in the country just to wave and smile at us, I wondered what will happen to them. And seeing how difficult their surroundings are, I can only imagine what lies in other parts of the country we cannot view. I believe there is much more hardship ahead for the people of North Korea. The psychological damage alone is unfathomable and I fear that many will perish whether through international actions or by their own leader. Unfortunately, it seems that given international states' concerns and the costs that would come with the unification of Korea, the only people who want the country to collapse is the North Korean people.



China views North Korea as a strategic buffer state in the region, the US does not want to enter a war with China or be responsible for the loss of innocent lives, and reunification would cost South Korea a vast amount of money in addition to taking on the burden of integrating the North Korean population culturally, economically, and politically – not to mention the necessary healthcare. While North Koreans generally adhere to the propaganda, and follow the government's strict rules, citizens cannot speak honestly about the government and their despair is evident.

My week in the hermit country was exhausting to say the least, but it was a unique experience to be able to connect with people from all over the world without the use of technology to distract us and to bond over such an adventure. However, to know that I was witnessing horrific human rights atrocities hidden beneath pageantry is a surreal and disturbing feeling I still contemplate almost a year later. What I have realized post-DPRK is that so many people in global affairs brush off the country or examine it more through relations between states without considering what is happening to its population or the nation's psyche.

Approximately 25 million people are suffering from manipulation, starvation and abuse. This is not a joke, and the future of DPRK should be analyzed as being more than just a pawn in a game. The one thing I took away from my time there that I can share with others is how important it is to understand the nuances of what is happening beneath the surface as much as possible , and to apply that knowledge in one's work . Without that, people just memorize facts and make poor judgements by refusing to acknowledge the mentality of populations and their personal struggles. What we all can take away from North Korea is the strength of the human spirit and that, for better or worse, we shouldn't dismiss that in dealing with their future.

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