

Contrary to Relentless Media Demonization, a Swiss Businessman Who Worked in North Korea for Seven Years Found Much To Like About the Country

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In November 2018, The New York Times ran a [front-page article](#) titled “In North Korea, Missile Bases Suggest a Great Deception.”

Co-authored by Pulitzer-winning correspondent David E. Sanger, the article cited satellite imagery and a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) to argue that North Korea was continuing to secretly develop missiles in violation of the June 2018 [Singapore agreement](#) between Kim Jong-un and U.S. President Donald Trump.

However, the prominently embedded satellite photo was actually dated March 2018—three months before Kim and Trump met in Singapore—and the missile bases presented as damning evidence of Kim’s duplicity had been known to South Korea for [at least two years](#).



Source: [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)

The *Times's* deception is part of a larger media propaganda campaign against North Korea that has helped condition the U.S. public to accept draconian U.S. sanctions policies, the spending of billions of dollars per year beefing up the South Korean military, and the \$7.1 billion Pacific Deterrence Initiative that includes a major naval build-up in the South China Sea.

Felix Abt was one of the first foreign entrepreneurs to work in North Korea, and the founding president of the first foreign chamber of commerce in North Korea, set up by a dozen resident foreign business people in 2005, and co-founder and director of the Pyongyang Business School.

He has just published a book entitled *A Land of Prison Camps, Starving Slaves and Nuclear Bombs? An Alternative Account to the Western Media's Blinkered North Korea Portrayal*, which debunks the media's narrative of North Korea as a "monolithic gulag network filled with slaves" and a "hellhole...rife with suffering and starvation."

A Land of Prison Camps, Starving Slaves and Nuclear Bombs ?

An alternative account to the Western
media's blinkered North Korea portrayal



Felix Abt

**Author of "A Capitalist in North Korea:
My Seven Years in the Hermit Kingdom"**

Abt's first memoir, *A Capitalist in North Korea: My Seven Years in the Hermit Kingdom* (Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), was blacklisted in Western media.

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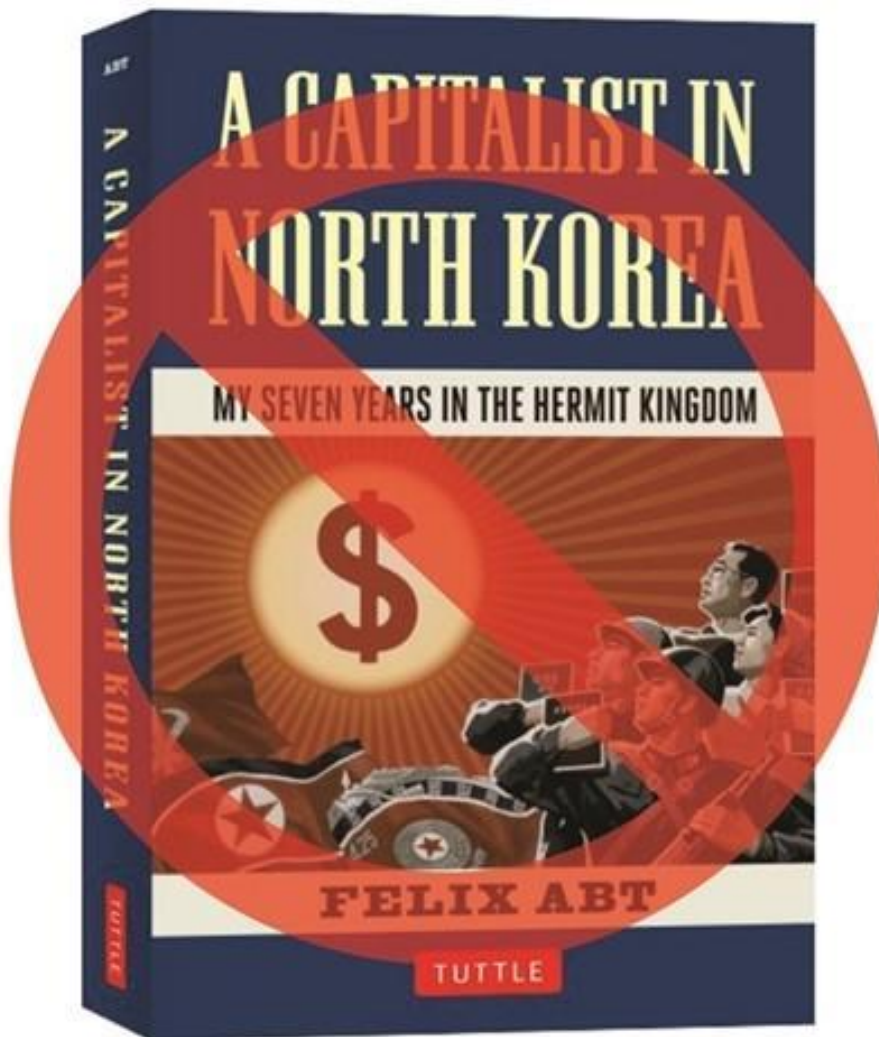


Photo courtesy of Felix Abt

In this latest book, he writes that,

“for decades, the United States has been waging a vitriolic public-opinion war against North Korea,” which functions as a “necessary bogeyman to persuade the American

taxpayers that the mammoth defense budgets for the benefit of one of its largest and most profitable industries, is justified.”

Forgotten is the litany of crimes committed by the United States against North Korea during the Korean War (1950-1953), including the systematic incineration of North Korean cities and villages with napalm, bombing dams to cause flooding on the rice fields and thus mass starvation, and dropping plague-infected flies in order to spread disease.

For all the hysteria in U.S. media about North Korea’s nuclear threat, Abt was told by almost everyone he met that North Korea needed nuclear weapons for defensive purposes to prevent a first strike from America—which threatened to destroy their country as it had done in the Korean War. Kim Jong-un would never be crazy enough to risk the catastrophic results of firing the weapons first.

Not Even Up to the Level of the *National Enquirer*

The multitude of outrageous stories about North Korea and its leader **Kim Jong-un** do not generally match basic journalistic standards—or even those of the *National Inquirer*.

Often, they rely on defectors who are paid by the South Korean government and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to spread disinformation.

In August 2013, the *London Telegraph* reported that Kim Jong-un had his ex-lover executed by firing squad because she allegedly made a pornographic film, though later the same publication reported that she had reappeared on North Korean television.

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Kim Jong-un's ex-lover 'executed by firing squad'

Kim Jong-un's ex-girlfriend was among a dozen well-known North Korean performers who were executed by firing squad nine days ago, according to South Korean reports.



Hyon Song-wol, a singer and rumoured to be a former lover of the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un

By Julian Ryall, Tokyo
10:09AM BST 29 Aug 2013

Comments

Hyon Song-wol, a singer, rumoured to be a former lover of the North Korean leader, is said to have been arrested on Aug 17 with 11 others for violating laws against pornography.



Hyon Song-wol starred in the video for her 2005 hit 'A Girl In The Saddle Of A Steed'

The reports in South Korea's Chosun Ilbo newspaper indicate that Hyon, a singer with the Unhasu Orchestra, was among those arrested on August 17 for violating domestic laws on pornography.

All 12 were machine-gunned three days later, with other members of North Korea's most famous pop groups and their immediate families

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Source: slideshare.net

ABC ridiculously also reported that [all male university students in Pyongyang were required to get haircuts exactly like Kim Jong-Un](#), though later there were [reports that Kim had banned leather coats to stop people from copying his style](#).

["Critical thinking just goes out the window on North Korea,"](#) observed Chad O'Carroll, founder of the [NK News](#) website.

A More Positive Picture Than in U.S. Demonology

Abt found that, while propaganda does abound in North Korea, the claim about a total news blackout is false. Kids recited to him old Korean folktales, not regime propaganda, and many people read foreign literature.



Example of misleading propaganda in Western media that presents North Korea in the worst possible light. [Source: japantimes.co]

Despite the crippling U.S. sanctions, North Korea has a growing economy, replete with an emerging entrepreneurial middle class and has made important technological advances.

Kim Chaek University of Technology, for example, developed a cranial CT scanner, which it sells to domestic hospitals.



DPRK-produced CT scanner, Kim Chaek University. [Photo courtesy Felix Abt]



Kim Chaek University [Source: alchetron.com]

Dr. Kee B. Park, a neurosurgeon on the faculty at Harvard University who has traveled to North Korea 18 times to advise its health programs, told Abt that the images from the CT scan he had seen in North Korea were “of satisfactory quality,” and could “help doctors detect a variety of diseases and conditions.”

Despite sanctions that banned fertilizer, spare parts for agricultural machines and fuel for

farm vehicles, Kim Chaek University had also developed methods that increased the yields of rice crops while decreasing plant disease.

Lies About Famine

During the 1990s, when North Korea experienced a famine precipitated by natural disasters and exacerbated by a drastic reduction in oil imports from the crumbling Soviet Union, Western think tanks, activists, and media from the *Wall Street Journal* to *Reuters* amplified the death toll by five times, thereby vilifying “evil” North Korea.

They claimed more than 3 million deaths out of a population of 22 million when the actual number was below 500,000, according to the French coordinator of the United Nations food distribution efforts. (The U.S. Census Bureau gave an estimate of between 500,000 and 600,000).

Despite a much-improved situation in the 2000s, the U.S. and world media continued to run stories every autumn quoting international aid agencies saying that North Korea was once again on the brink of mass starvation.



Source: [quora.com](https://www.quora.com)

Abt reports that, with no indigenous sources of oil and natural gas, North Korea depends on imported energy inputs to produce fertilizers and pesticides, to fuel irrigation equipment and agricultural machinery and to transport seeds and crops.

The UN prohibition on essential energy imports thus helped provoke the collapse of North Korea’s agricultural production in 2018 to levels similar to those of the famine years—though the source of the crisis was ignored, and human rights groups in the West shamefully did not call for the lifting of the sanctions.

Despite all of its problems, North Korea still ranks above India on the Global Hunger Index. The country has improved its agricultural productivity through land reclamation projects and imported potato varieties from Europe that were cheap, easy to grow and nutritious.



Photo courtesy of Felix Abt

An Orwellian Dystopia—or Something Else?

Los Angeles Times journalist Barbara Demick, in her 2010 best-selling book, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, compared North Korea to George Orwell's Oceania, a futuristic dystopia where the "only color to be found was in propaganda posters."

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR

“Provocative . . . offers extensive evidence of the author’s deep knowledge of this country while keeping its sights firmly on individual stories and human details.” —*The New York Times*



NOTHING TO ENVY

ORDINARY LIVES
IN NORTH KOREA

BARBARA DEMICK



Source: [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/Nothing-to-Envy-Ordinary-Lives-North-Korea/dp/0312375266)

Melanie Kirkpatrick reported in the *Wall Street Journal* that North Korea kept its “citizens in the dark ages,” with “foreign goods being kept out.”

In reality, it was not the North Korean government but U.S. sanctions that kept foreign goods out—including household items like lipstick, salami sausages, knives and watches, whose importation was all banned.

And while there are certainly oppressive features of society, including a harsh criminal justice system, life in North Korea in Abt’s observations is far from dystopic or out of the dark ages.

Rather, it is not very different from other countries: Buildings are painted in all kinds of colors (color is not only found in propaganda posters), the people enjoy pizza, sweets, and

other delicacies along with trips to the beach, and kids ride bikes, roller-skate and play other games in the street.



Photos courtesy of Felix Abt

Women particularly thrive as North Korea's constitution accords them equal social status

and rights with men, and a range of benefits including maternity leave.^[1]



Felix Abt with North Korean businesswomen. [Photo courtesy of Felix Abt]

Rather than being starved or downtrodden, most of the workers that Abt met were reasonably well compensated and diligent. The pharmaceutical company that he ran was obsessed with quality and achieved good manufacturing practices as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), winning bidding competitions against foreign competitors.

North Korea's airline, Air Koryo, meanwhile, meets high safety standards despite being called in the West the "world's worst airline."



Stewardess with North Korea's national airline, Air Koryo, which the media called the world's worst airline, but which actually meets high safety standards. [Photo courtesy of Felix Abt]

Tantamount to Another Act of War

A cruel feature of the sanctions policy was its denying North Koreans the opportunity to work abroad, shattering the aspirations of many working people.

North Korean painters are now prohibited from selling their paintings abroad. Other sanctions have prevented North Korea from rebuilding water supplies and drainage systems, causing an upsurge of health problems, and blocked it from importing mechanical parts and fuel to operate agricultural machinery, causing food shortages.

Because U.S. and UK credit and financial institutions were prohibited from dealing with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK-North Korea), North Korean importers and exporters had to travel to their foreign suppliers with suitcases stashed with cash or empty money bags to collect payments.

The sanctions furthermore a) helped prevent the signing of a 9-digit dollar contract with a Swiss company that would have greatly improved North Korea's power network; b) led to reduction in quality and availability of medicines; c) destroyed the possibility of safe mines because of the banning of the import of mine-safety equipment; and d) forced numerous garment factories to close, resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of jobs.



North Korean miners are deprived of property safety because of the inability to import mine safety equipment due to U.S. sanctions. [Photo courtesy of Felix Abt]

A businessman adversely impacted by sanctions told Abt that he considered the sanctions “tantamount to another act of war by hostile Western powers,” adding that “we in our company have never done anything wrong or illegal.”

As America Wishes It to Be Viewed

Abt concludes his book by noting that,

“given the dominant U.S.-centric North Korea narrative, with no other voice to offer balance or express the true reality, it is hard to blame the general global populace for accepting the situation as America and its supporters wish it to be viewed.”

Perhaps if more Americans learned about the history of the Korean War and its barbarism, they might show some empathy for North Koreans and try and better understand the country’s policies; or perhaps, if more foreign exchanges are established, they might press their government to end the brutal sanctions and to pursue a formal end to the Korean War.

Until that time, we can expect that North Korea will be continuously invoked as a reference point for tyranny and its leader ridiculed, in quasi-racist fashion, as a clownish dictator.



Source: Madison.com

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Notes

1. Abt points out that North Korea has more female bank managers than does South Korea.

Featured image: A family eats ice cream in North Korea [taken by Eva Bartlett]

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