

North Korea, a Land of Human Achievement, Love and Joy

North Korea Celebrates 60th Anniversary of Victory

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As the plane – Russian-built Tupolev-204 – was taking off from Pyongyang Airport, I felt nothing, absolutely nothing. The morning fog was at first covering the runway, and then it began to lift. The engines roared. Right after the takeoff I could clearly distinguish green fields, neat villages and ribbons of ample and lazy rivers below the wing. It was undeniably a beautiful sight: melancholic, poetic, and truly dramatic. And yet I felt numb. I was feeling nothing, absolutely nothing.

Overhead monitors were beaming endless images of one parade after another, of endless celebrations and bombastic concerts. The volume was up, women and men on the screen were singing enthusiastically, soldiers were marching; roaring jets and helicopters were penetrating the blue sky. The conductor was waving his hands. The standing crowd was applauding. Emotions were brought to an absolute extreme; watering the eyes of the people, and omnipresent pride on their faces.

Suddenly I felt empty, scared of something.

After seeing more than 150 countries, all over the world, after covering wars and conflicts, some of unimaginable intensity and brutality, I was suddenly longing for some rest, even for total silence.

60 years ago North Korea won the war. But some 4 million people died many of them, civilians. Maybe it was more than 4 million, nobody knows exactly. The capital city Pyongyang was totally leveled to the ground. I did not want to hear loud music and long speeches. I wanted to pay tribute to those who lost their lives, by sitting quietly by the river covered by mist, listening to the tall grass. But during my 8 days in North Korea, I had very few moments of silence, almost no opportunity to reflect.

What have I seen in those 8 days in DPRK – in North Korea? I saw an enormous futuristic city, Pyongyang, the capital, built from the ashes. I saw enormous theatres and stadiums, a metro system deep below the ground (public transportation doubling as nuclear shelter, in case the city came under attack). I saw trolley buses and double-decker buses, wide avenues, unimaginably ample sidewalks, roller-skating rinks and playgrounds for children.

Statues and monuments were everywhere. The size of some boulevards and buildings were simply overwhelming. For more than a decade I lived in Manhattan, but this was very different grandeur. New York was growing towards the sky, while Pyongyang consisted of tremendous open spaces and massive eclectic buildings.

Outside the capital I saw green fields, and farmers walking home deep in the countryside. Clearly, there was no malnutrition among children, and despite the embargo, everyone was decently dressed.

I saw packed squares, with tens of thousands of people shouting slogans from the top of their lungs. I saw thousands of women in colorful traditional dresses waving their flags and ribbons, cheering when the command was given, welcoming us – international delegates. Marching next to me for peace, was a former US Attorney General, Ramsey Clark, and at my other side, the leader of one of the Indian Communist Parties. There were human rights lawyers from the United States and from all over the world, Turkish revolutionaries, and, for hard to understand reasons, several heads of the Ugandan military.

But I did not come here to march. I came here to film and to photograph, to see the faces of local people, to read what was written on those faces, to feel, to sense, and to try to understand.

Instead of loud cheers, I came to listen to the whispers, hoping to catch understated facial expressions, tiny signs of fear, of joy, of love and even of existentialist confusion.

The West, its policy makers and mass media, succeeded in creating an image of a dehumanized North Korea. They did it by blurring the faces. For decades North Koreans were being portrayed as inhabitants of some monstrous hermit empire where men, women and children all look alike, dress the same, behave like robots, never smile and do not look into each other's eyes.

Before I came here, before I agreed to come, I explained to the organizers that I was not interested in all those elaborate fireworks and packed stadiums. I wanted to see a mom taking her child to school. I was longing to capture the faces of lovers at dusk, sitting side by side on some remote bench, whispering to each other those urgent words, those pledges that make life worth living; the same words, the same pledges, uttered all over the world.

Paradoxically, I was discouraged to do so. Instead I was asked to march. From a storyteller and a man who is used to document the world, I was converted into a delegate. And whenever the crowd spotted me, it cheered, and then I felt embarrassed, I was longing desperately to become invisible, or to at least find some hiding place. Not because I was doing something wrong, but simply because I was unaccustomed to such naked outbursts of enthusiasm directed at me.

And so I marched, for peace and for the re-unification of the Korean nation. And while I marched, I kept filming and photographing. It must have looked awkward, I have to admit: a delegate who was filming a bunch of women who were dressed in their colorful traditional dresses, cheering him with their paper ribbons, and shouting at top of their lungs.

I soon discovered that I was fighting for every glimpse of reality, of common life. Instead I had been fed with an extravaganza.

I was taken to those stadiums with 100,000 people, where children change positions of their boards periodically, and the entire side of the tribune suddenly becomes like some colorful, living storyboard. I was witnessing huge events, with thousands of dancers, with fireworks and multiple bands.

Yet what impressed me the most was an ancient and tiny stone bridge in Kaesong City, near the Demilitarized Zone. And the scene around the bridge: a tiny girl, perhaps three years old, her sock torn, crying, while her mother caressed her hair in the most tender, warmest way imaginable.

My hosts, they did not seem to understand. I explained to them, again and again, but my words sounded too foreign to them.

As far as they were concerned, I was just 'some famous writer, filmmaker, and journalist'. They needed me to show great support for their revolution, and deep reverence for their suffering during the Western onslaught more than 60 years ago.

Naturally I felt reverence and grief, but that was all that I was expected to feel. I felt much more.

But I fell in love, instantly with the North Korean countryside, and the faces of North Korean farmers and city dwellers. These were pure faces, honest and expressive. What could I do? Love is subjective; it is irrational. The exaggerated greenery of the fields, children playing at the roadside, soldiers returning home to their villages for a short home-leave, women facing the sun at dusk: it was overwhelming; love at first sight, as I said.

I was photographing through the windshield; I was annoying the organizers, demanding that they stop in the middle of the road.

Then on July 26 I met, together with Ramsey Clark and few other delegates, Mr. Yang Hyong Sob, the Vice President of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Committee. He looked like a very kind man, and I was given a chance to exchange some ideas with him. I explained that the best way to combat Western propaganda is to show to the world the faces of North Korean people.

"It is their common tactic", I said. "They portray people of China, Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Serbia, as heartless, as if they were some plastic androids. Then, subconsciously, compassion for the people of those nations vanishes from the hearts of the Western public. Suddenly it is fine to starve them, to bomb them, to murder thousands, even millions of those androids. But once the faces are shown, the Western public gets confused; many refuse to support mass murder."

The Vice-President nodded. He smiled at me. As we were leaving, he locked me in a bear hug, and said simply "Please come back!"

But even after that meaningful exchange, I was still marching. And the simplest images were continuously out of my reach. "For this trip only, as we are celebrating the 60th Anniversary", I was told. But I lived for now and now, I wanted to work.

I saw the Demilitarized zone, DMZ, and the South Korean border post at Panmunjom. Twice in the past I had visited the same place, only from the opposite side. The DMZ is supposed to be the most fortified border in the world, as the two Koreas are still technically at war. The two armies are grudgingly facing each other, armed to the teeth, while the US forces are holed up somewhere underground on the southern side.

Yet The DMZ is like some eye of the storm, sitting in between all those nukes, tanks and rocket launchers, quietly and pristinely. Rivers are lazily flowing, and farmers are growing

ginseng, arguably the best in the world.

I endured endless security measures, and at the end I was facing the empty South Korean visitor's terrace. There were obviously expectations of some hostilities on both sides of the line, and no 'ordinary' visitors were allowed to travel here.

It was all a big mess, and a never-ending drama. A divided nation; millions of deaths. I saw it all in the city of Sinchon. The tunnels where the US troops massacred thousands of civilians during the war, old veterans and survivors of the massacres spoke; recalling those gruesome events.

In 1950, at the beginning of the war, the city of Sinch'ŏn was the site of a massacre of civilians by occupying U.S forces. The number of civilians killed over the 52-day period was allegedly over 35,000 people, the equivalent of a quarter of the city's population at the time.

It all looked chillingly familiar. I used to photograph the craters left behind after the carpet bombings of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Brutality, brutality, brutality... Millions of faceless victims burned alive by napalm, 'bomb-lets' that explode decades later when children or water buffaloes are playing on the fields.

Ramsey Clark spoke about the horrors of the past, and about the brutality of the US actions. An old man, one of the survivors of the mass killings of civilians in the tunnels, spoke about horrors he witnessed as a child. The artwork in the local museum depicted the brutal torture and rape of Korean women by US troops, their bodies mutilated; with nipples penetrated by metal hooks.

In the West, the topic remains almost totally taboo. One of the greatest journalists of the 20th century, Wilfred Burchett, even lost his citizenship and became 'an enemy of the Australian people', partially because he dared to describe the suffering of the North Korean people, a few years after he had described the aftermath of Hiroshima bombing in his 1945 iconic report, "[I Write This As a Warning To the World](#)".

The brass band begins to play yet another military tune. I zoom on an old lady, her chest decorated with medals. As I get ready to press the shutter, two large tears begin rolling down her cheeks. And suddenly I realize that I cannot photograph her. I really cannot. Her face is all wrinkled, and yet it is both youthful and endlessly tender. Here is my face, I think, the face I was looking for all those days. And yet I cannot even press the shutter of my Leica.

Then something squeezes my throat and I have to search in my equipment bag for some tissue, as my glasses get foggy, and for a short time I cannot see anything at all. I sob loudly, just once. Nobody can hear, because of the loud playing of the band.

Later I get closer to her, and I bow, and she reciprocated. We make our separate peace in the middle of the boiling-hot main square. I am suddenly happy to be here. We have both lost something. She lost more. I was certain she lost at least half of her loved-ones in the carnage of those bygone years. I lost something too: I lost all respect and belonging, to the culture that is still ruling the world; the culture that was once mine, but a culture that is still robbing people of their faces, and then burns their bodies with napalm and flames.

It is the 60th Anniversary of Victory Day in the DPRK. An anniversary marked by tears, grey

hair, tremendous fireworks, parades, and by the memories of fire.

That evening, after returning to the capital, I finally made it to the river. It was covered by a gentle but impenetrable fog. There were two lovers sitting by the shore, motionless, in silent embrace. The woman's hair was gently falling on her lover's shoulder. He was holding her hand, reverently. I was going to lift my big professional camera, but then I stopped, abruptly, all of a sudden too afraid that what my eyes were seeing or my brain imagining, would not be reflected in the viewfinder.

André Vltchek is a novelist, filmmaker, and investigative journalist. He has covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. His critically acclaimed political revolutionary novel [Point of No Return](#) is now re-edited and available. [Oceania](#) is his book on Western imperialism in South Pacific. His provocative book about post-Suharto Indonesia and market-fundamentalism is called [Indonesia: The Archipelago of Fear](#). He just completed a feature documentary *Rwanda Gambit* about Rwandan history and the plunder of DR Congo. After living for many years in Latin America and Oceania, Vltchek presently resides and works in East Asia and Africa. He can be reached through his [website](#). [Read other articles by Andre](#).

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Andre Vltchek is a philosopher, novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. His latest books are: "Exposing Lies Of The Empire" and "Fighting Against Western Imperialism". Discussion with Noam Chomsky: On Western Terrorism. Point of No Return is his critically acclaimed political novel. Oceania - a book on Western imperialism in the South Pacific. His provocative book about Indonesia: "Indonesia - The Archipelago of Fear". Andre is making films for teleSUR and Press TV. After living for many years in Latin America and Oceania, Vltchek presently resides and works in East Asia and the Middle East. He can be reached through his website or his Twitter.

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