

RESEARCH NOTE

# The Natural Death of North Korean Stalinism

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**


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This report analyzes the sweeping changes that have taken place in North Korea over the past fifteen years, evaluates the impact these changes will likely have on the fate of the state, and offers implications for U.S. policy.

**MAIN ARGUMENT**

The last fifteen years have witnessed the gradual wearing away of North Korean Stalinism. The collapse of the centrally planned economy has resulted in the unprecedented revival of small business. The corruption and gradual disintegration of the bureaucracy have led to considerable relaxation of police control. North Korea's self-imposed information blockade has been broken, and uncensored information about the outside world is flowing in. Thus, while North Korea remains under authoritarian rule, the polity can no longer be described as "Stalinist."

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- Encouraging the gradual disintegration of Stalinism would help make North Korea more predictable and would pave the way for a democratic transition in the future.
- The new situation has created opportunities to communicate with common North Koreans, opportunities that can be exploited by the outside world.
- Large-scale economic ventures spearheaded by the United States and other foreign businesses in the North would likely only generate income for the elite and could even support nuclear development and other military projects; small-scale activities, on the other hand, would help engage the North Korean people and expose them to the outside world.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE ESSAY**

An overview (p. 98) of the pre-1990 situation in North Korea is followed by separate analyses of the three main areas of change in North Korea that have occurred over the past fifteen years:

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Diminishing Political Control . . . . .	114

A conclusion (p. 118) summarizes the main points of the report and discusses how the collapse of North Korean Stalinism can be hastened.

North Korea is often described as a “Stalinist state” or “Stalinist regime.” For decades, this description was correct. Stalinism was imposed on North Korea in the 1940s as a result of joint efforts of the political left in North Korea and the Soviet occupation forces. In the late 1950s Kim Il Sung’s regime refused to follow the Soviet-inspired de-Stalinization drive that was occurring throughout the Communist bloc, and stubbornly kept most features once borrowed from the USSR of the late 1940s.

Applying the word “Stalinism” to North Korea nowadays, however, is misleading. Though still a brutal tyranny engaged in nuclear brinkmanship, North Korea is no longer a Stalinist state. The system of omnipresent government control began to fall apart before Kim Il Sung’s death in 1994, and the devastating famine of 1996–99 dealt the final blow to North Korean Stalinism. Unlike the USSR and China, where the Stalinist systems were dismantled through reforms from above, North Korean Stalinism has actually crumbled under the weight of its own economic inefficiency.

The dramatic social changes that have taken place in North Korea over the last fifteen years are often underestimated—not least because the data available about the internal developments in this secretive country is partial and imperfect. Though the data is incomplete, however, gatherable information does exist. The increasing stream of North Korean refugees, the contacts between North Korean agencies and overseas organizations, and the increasingly frequent visits of foreigners are all allowing us to learn more about the ongoing transformation of North Korean society.

This knowledge contributes toward a better understanding of Stalinism as well as the reasons for the rise and eventual failure of this social system that has exercised such a profound influence on 20th century history. In a more practical vein, knowledge of these ongoing changes helps reveal how Western countries—by encouraging these developments—can both make Pyongyang more predictable and help to encourage North Korea’s democratization.

This article begins by tracing the peculiar features of North Korean Stalinism prior to the 1990s. The next three sections provide analyses of three main areas of change in North Korea that have occurred over the past fifteen years. One such area is the gradual demise of the information management system, which for many decades has been vital to regime survival. A second is the growth of the market economy, and a third and final area of change is the collapse of the elaborate social control system that had defined the lives of the North Koreans since World War II. A conclusion summarizes the main points of the report and discusses how the collapse of North Korean Stalinism can be hastened.

PRE-1990 NORTH KOREA:  
THE WORLD'S PUREST STALINISM?

Stalinism has long been a word widely used and abused in everyday discourse, and as a result has become a vague and negative label that can be applied to virtually any kind of repressive or non-capitalist regime. Henry Reichman has written that Stalinism “has become an almost universally accepted category in both Soviet and Communist history, yet there is remarkably little discussion of its meaning.”<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, most scholars doing research on the history of communism widely use the term “Stalinism” as a particular sub-type of communist systems. Such historians include Sheila Fitzpatrick, Stephen Kotkin, and Ivan Berend, to name just a few.<sup>2</sup>

Most often the term is used to describe Soviet policy and polity over a period of three decades between Stalin’s ascent to power in the mid-1920s and Khrushchev’s reforms of the mid-1950s. In the mid-1940s the Stalinist system found fertile ground to develop in the countries of Eastern Europe and North Korea. Maoist China is less frequently described as “Stalinist,” even if parallels between Maoism and Stalinism are numerous.<sup>3</sup> In the USSR the system was partially dismantled during Khrushchev’s reforms of the mid- and late-1950s. The Soviet Union remained an authoritarian society after these reforms, but the social climate in the country changed dramatically and many institutions of earlier eras disappeared or changed beyond recognition. One must agree with Eric Hobsbawm’s characterization of the Soviet Union under Khrushchev and Brezhnev: “As the Gulag emptied in the late 1950s, the USSR remained a society which treated its citizens badly by Western standards, but ceased to be a society which imprisoned and killed its citizens on a uniquely massive scale.”<sup>4</sup>

In the late 1950s, Moscow imposed an obligatory de-Stalinization program on subordinate Communist governments. In most cases, local Com-

<sup>1</sup> Henry Reichman, “Reconsidering ‘Stalinism,’” *Theory and Society* 17, no. 1 (1988), 57. His description is still valid today.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (University of California Press, 1995); and Ivan Berend, *Central and Eastern Europe 1944–1993: Detour from the Periphery to the Periphery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> For a rare description of Mao’s China as Stalinist, see Hua-yu Li, “The Political Stalinization of China: The Establishment of One-Party Constitutionalism, 1948–1954,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 28–47.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 392.

munist leaders accepted de-Stalinization willingly, but some (notably those leaders in North Korea, Albania, and Romania) refused to bow to Moscow's demands and instead not only kept the Stalinist system more or less intact, but even strengthened its nationalist component.

The most comprehensive definition of Stalinism perhaps belongs to Seweryn Bialer, who suggested seven major features of a developed Stalinist system—what he termed “mature” or late “Stalinism.” These traits include:

- a system of mass terror
- extinction of the party as a movement
- the shapelessness of macro-political organization
- an extreme mobilizational model of economic growth, tied to goals of achieving military power and the political consequences thereof
- a heterogenous value system that favored economic status and power stratification, fostered extraordinary cultural uniformity, and was tied to extreme nationalism
- the end of the revolutionary impulse to change society and the persistence of the conservative *status quo* attitude toward existing institutions
- a system of personal dictatorship<sup>5</sup>

Even a cursory look through Bialer's seven features of “mature Stalinism” reveals that the North Korea of Kim Il Sung's era—and especially of the 1961–86 period—was an excellent specimen indeed. Many of the traits were even more pronounced in Kim's North Korea than in Stalin's Russia (from which they had been borrowed in the late 1940s). Indeed, mobilization and the militarized style of economic management was always explicitly emphasized in North Korea; the worst excesses of the Russian plants of the 1930s pale in comparison with the daily life in North Korean factories and construction sites, where endless “100-day battles” and even “200-day battles” prevented workers from returning home even at night. Stalin's nationalism of the late 1940s may often have appeared bizarre and comical, but was in fact outdone by the North Korean eulogies to the greatness of Korea past and present. Government control over the daily lives of the population was also more pronounced in North Korea than in the USSR. In Stalin's USSR, only the

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<sup>5</sup> Seweryn Bialer, *Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability, and Change in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 9.