Life Under Totalitarianism: Democratic People’s Republic of Korea
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Abstract
This paper examines North Korea’s totalitarian regime and its effect on the ordinary lives of its citizens. Drawing heavily from the personal narratives of defectors presented in Barbara Demick’s Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea, this paper argues that the regime’s total control over both the private and public spheres sacrifices the civil liberties of its citizens in order to ensure the survival of the Worker’s Party and the legacy of Kim Il Sung. This subservience to the state is achieved through ideological indoctrination, an intrusive political police, and the total control over communication. By maintaining a completely closed society, the regime buffers itself from the dangers of democratic freedoms, engenders an atmosphere of fear, and impoverishes its citizens to the benefit of the ruling regime.

I. Invading the Private Sphere
North Koreans live under constant surveillance, making it impossible for them to obtain the autonomy to make even basic decisions about their lives. Drawing heavily from the personal narratives of defectors presented in Barbara Demick’s Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea, this paper argues that the regime’s total control over both the private and public spheres sacrifices the civil liberties of its citizens in order to ensure the survival of the Worker’s Party and the legacy of Kim Il Sung. This subservience to the state is achieved through ideological indoctrination, an intrusive political police, and the total control over communication. By maintaining a completely closed society, the regime buffers itself from the dangers of democratic freedoms, engenders an atmosphere of fear, and impoverishes its citizens to the benefit of the ruling regime.

II. Lack of Individual Autonomy
The Worker’s party controls every aspect of an individual’s life, determining what clothes one can wear, when individuals can marry, and where citizens are allowed to travel.
- In 1971, Kim Il Sung issued a special instruction, urging men to marry at age 30 and women at age 28. To him, individuals needed to “have done enough for the country and people” (Demick 81) prior to pursuing their individualistic aspirations.
- Owning cars is illegal and citizens must acquire travel permits to leave their city or town.
- Riding bicycles for girls has been outlawed at times.

By eliminating privacy, controlling personal intimacy and restricting freedom of movement the regime successfully engrains within each of its citizens the importance of the collective over the individual. Its citizens must adhere to these laws or face retribution in the form of imprisonment and social rejection.

III. Ideological Indoctrination/ Propaganda Machine
As the above chart indicates, access to outside information is largely absent in North Korea. The majority of its citizenry rely upon word of mouth and state-controlled television as the most important sources of information. North Koreans have little to no access to the Internet.
- The regime also controls the written historical record, enabling it to embed its ideology through the systematic education of the populace.
- At the same time, the regime presents North Korea as prosperous relative to the rest of the world, touting slogans such as “Nothing to Envy in the World.”

The level of indoctrination is so extreme that the majority of North Koreans believed the 1990s famine that killed an estimated 600,000 to 2 million people was not the fault of the ruling regime, but rather the result of a natural disaster and “imperialist” US sanctions. The total control of the individual as well as media outlets allows the regime to manipulate information without having to fear a popular uprising. By blaming outsiders, the regime deflects criticism and further emboldens its image of infallibility in the eyes of its citizens.

Conclusion
It is this reality that pushes North Koreans to defect. The ruling regime sacrifices the wellbeing and livelihood of its citizens to ensure its hold on power. The regime invades every aspect of the individual’s life primarily because without its total control over society both its ideology and its governance would appear untenable to its populace. The Worker’s Party aspires to create citizens dedicated to the overall growth of the collective society. It actively limits personal freedoms and controls the flow of information to an unprecedented degree. Through its action, and inaction, the regime clearly communicates that, the lives of its citizens mean little when compared to its own drive to maintain control and power.