North Korea is perhaps the only state in the world to become anathema across virtually the entire spectrum of political opinion in the 1990s, from left to right and from Washington to Beijing to Moscow. The consensus has been that the DPRK is a rogue terrorist-totalitarian nightmare, the quintessence of Oriental despotism, if not outright dementia. Our authors hate it too. Helen-Louise Hunter likens this ‘cult society’ to groups trundling behind Jim Jones or Charles Manson; Eberstadt approvingly cites the dictum that it is ‘as close to totalitarianism as a humanly operated society could come’. There is a deafening absence of any doubts or qualifications to such images—or to the seemingly universal wish that Kim Jong Il’s socialism-in-one-family would just go away, the sooner the better. In this context, what is really significant about these two books is that they represent the best analysis of North Korea that Washington has to offer. Hunter worked for two decades in the Central Intelligence Agency, where her text first appeared (if that is the right word) as a long internal memorandum. In his foreword to the book, former Congressional Cold Warrior Stephen Solarz explains that when he read this document he realized that her ‘brilliant and breathtaking analysis’ represented ‘what the Rosetta stone was to ancient Egypt’ (sic)—a feat of decipherment so rare that it took him a decade to get the CIA to declassify it.

Eberstadt, who has been with the American Enterprise Institute for fifteen years, made his name by demonstrating the wretched state of health care and steep declines in life expectancy in the USSR, several years before the disintegration of the Soviet Union. For a decade he has been predicting the impending collapse of North Korea—tidings he first brought to the Wall Street Journal in June 1990. His book is an extended attempt to update and justify this perpetual forecast.
The Korea Foundation that helped fund Eberstadt’s study certainly knew what it was doing—it was headed at the time by the former deputy chief of Seoul’s intelligence agency. American taxpayers, on the other hand, often wonder what they are getting for the $28 to $30 billion they pour into Washington’s ‘intelligence community’ every year—and so did I, on having to wade up to page 68 of Hunter’s book before learning anything new (that Kim Il Sung University has a baseball team—the Japanese introduced this venerable American game to Korea, but given its popularity in the South, it comes as a mild surprise that it has survived in the North). Long-standing impressions that inside the Beltway ‘intelligence’ is a euphemism for the halt leading the blind are likely to be reinforced by her painfully weak grasp of Korean, which leads her to misspell a word as significant as sasang—‘thought’, as in ‘Kim Il Sung thought’—rendered as sangsa in its only two appearances in the book. Likewise Eberstadt, feigning knowledge of Korean, drops mangled and meaningless transliterations along the way.

This is not to say either work is worthless. On the contrary, within their cultural and ideological limits, both are instructive. Hunter’s book contains valuable information on such relatively arcane subjects as North Korean wage and price structures, the self-sufficient neighbourhood practices that have generally averted the long lines for goods that characterized Soviet-style communism, and the decade that almost every North Korean young man is required to devote to military service in this garrison state. She is able to point out many achievements of the North Korean system, which anyone outside the CIA would be labelled a sympathizer for noting—compassionate care for war orphans in particular, and children in general; ‘radical change’ in the position of women; genuinely free housing; preventive medicine to a fairly high standard; infant mortality rates comparable to the most advanced countries, until the recent famine. It is also striking that Hunter repeatedly asserts that the vast majority of North Koreans do indeed revere Kim Il Sung, as the regime claims they do, not excluding even the defectors from the system on whose information the book depends for the core of its evidence.

For his part, Eberstadt correctly describes North Korea as an industrialized economy in an urban society—unlike the widespread ignoramuses who picture it as a kind of Albania or Cambodia of Northeast Asia. Only about 4 million out of 22 million people in the DPRK still work on the land, he reckons. Although routinely depicted as ‘Stalinist’, North Korea ‘has too few farmers to permit a policy of “squeezing the countryside” any realistic chance of success’. Eberstadt tracks, however, a systematic decline in the state’s ability either to import or to invest in capital goods since 1972. In the past decade the DPRK’s deepest economic problems have been rooted in an obsolescent industrial structure and foundering energy regime, which have left the chemical sector unable to supply the massive inputs of fertilizer once available for agriculture. The result has been
declining food production, which became catastrophic shortfall when the worst flooding in decades hit the country in 1995 and 1996. Eberstadt does not pretend to know how many North Koreans died as a result of food shortages. He cites claims of two to three million, but suggests that it is possible the actual figure might be nearer the DPRK’s official figure of 200,000. What he does not point out is that in its worst phase the famine only began to approach India’s year-in, year-out toll of infant mortality and death from starvation, as proportions of their respective populations.

Both Eberstadt and Hunter maintain that it is remarkable how little the DPRK has changed since its foundation half a century ago. Yet—parroting the Beltway wisdom that, in Solarz’s words, North Korea is ‘a country about which we know virtually nothing’—neither pay a whit of attention to its origins. In reality, we know as much about the genesis of the DPRK as of any communist state: indeed perhaps more, because of the large archive of North Korean documentation that MacArthur captured—as sole trophy—on his march to the Yalu, which was declassified in 1977. Excellent scholarship has come from those who can read these materials. Haruki Wada of Tokyo University used them to produce a fine book, available only in Japanese and Korean, arguing that the DPRK was born as a ‘guerrilla state’, anti-colonial and anti-Japanese to its core, whose unyieldingly recalcitrant foreign postures—successfully keeping both the USSR and PRC at arm’s length—can also be traced back to the ancien régime isolationism of what was famously called the ‘Hermit Kingdom’. Charles Armstrong of Columbia University will soon publish a book on the origins of the North Korean state using the same archive.

By contrast, Hunter’s talk of a ‘cult society’ merely betrays her lack of cultural sense for the society she spent so many years studying, presumably with the best intelligence materials that the US state can muster at her fingertips. Had she been even a soupçon more familiar with the peninsula’s history, she would have realized just how extensive worship of kingly wisdom, paeans of praise to rulers’ virtue, abject obeisance to authority—in short, seemingly absurd veneration of leaders and elders—was (and is) in Korean patriarchal society. Not to speak of a ‘national’ self-reference of rare intensity: a few years ago I was standing in front of the real Rosetta stone at the British Museum. Behind me two Koreans were chatting. One of them pointed out that all three archaic languages depicted on this stone were in fact derivatives of the original mother tongue—Korean. In such an exchange, there is more to be learnt about the prevalence of grandiose pretensions in North (and South) Korea than there is in all Hunter’s supermarket talk about a cult society.

Eberstadt, on the other hand, sees the DPRK all but entirely through the lens of Soviet and East European communism. For him, the regime has always relied on Moscow’s conception of the ‘correlation of forces’ as a compass in the outside world. If so, P’yongyang should have cashed in its chips in 1989. No
other state has faced such an array of enemy ‘forces’ and seemingly insurmountable crises since then, with next to no help from anyone. What he overlooks is the revolutionary nationalism at the origins of the North Korean regime, as of those in Vietnam and China, yielding no significant break since 1989 in Asian communism. Kim Il Sung and his fellow guerrillas learnt their economics from Japan’s hell-for-leather industrialization—and militarization—programme that put an end to the inter-war depression for Japan, while putting every Korean at risk of being yanked about by a relentless imperial mobilization which encompassed millions more than the 200,000 ‘comfort women’ that most of the world learnt of only recently. This generation, committed to an autarkic political economy designed to solve the problems of the 1930s, dominated the regime right down to the mid 1990s. It is only now, when they are mostly gone, that Kim Jong Il has started to steer a new course for the DPRK, playing its short hand quite deftly. No hint of such a possibility can be found in Eberstadt’s book. Since he completed it, North Korea has launched a diplomatic offensive, exchanging embassies with Italy, the Philippines and Canada, exploring ties with other Western countries, and joining ASEAN’s Regional Federation. Most spectacularly, Kim Jong Il has welcomed Kim Dae Jung to the first inter-Korean summit, on Northern soil.

The enabling condition for the turn in P’yongyang has, of course, been the dramatic change in policy towards the North in Seoul. No Southern leader had ever looked at the DPRK as anything other than a morsel to be swallowed. But at his inauguration Kim Dae Jung pledged himself to avoid any moves designed to absorb North Korea on the model of German reunification. This has been the key commitment in his ‘Sunshine’ policy, which has transformed the atmosphere between the two states. Eberstadt grotesquely informs us that the new line of the ROK has been a big ‘setback’ for the DPRK, because it has made North Korea’s ‘stalwartly hostile posture towards Seoul yet more remote and implausible’. In reality, its effect has been to allow the North to feel secure enough to change its own policies and move forward. In the past, the South’s National Security Law—which in different versions goes back to 1948—had officially designated the DPRK as no more than an ‘anti-state organization’, while the North had needless to say never recognized the legitimacy of the ROK. Kim Dae Jung was also the first head of state publicly to call for an end to the fifty-year-old American blockade of the North, and to ship food and other forms of aid to the DPRK without demanding concessions. He has encouraged South Korean business to build plants in the North, and backed the massive schemes of Chung Yu Jong, the Hyundai boss born in the North who has for years been at the forefront of economic relations between the two Koreas. These were the basecamps for the summit between the two Kims as Presidents of North and South in P’yongyang this year, at which Kim Jong II confounded expectations with a display of Confucian etiquette worthy of the most conservative traditions in the
Two months later, Chung Yu Jong came back from P’yongyang with a deal to open hundreds of factories, employing up to 200,000 North Korean workers, in and around the ancient Koryo capital of Kaesong, a city bisected by the 38th parallel but firmly within the DPRK since the war ended.

Kim Dae Jung’s innovations come from the experience of a leader whose adult lifetime spans the entire existence of both Koreas. He was a political activist just after Liberation, joining a leftist people’s committee in the port city of Mokp’o in September 1945, before later aligning himself with the opposition Korean Democratic Party. He knows how many people in his native Southwest actively cooperated with the North Koreans during three months of occupation in the summer of 1950. He is also well aware of the forces that lay behind the Kwangju Rebellion in May 1980—and the need to come to terms with its repression if South Koreans were ever to live together peaceably, even if he eventually pardoned its perpetrators. Above all, his tenure in office has constituted the first real political break with the ruling order that had held power continuously from 1945 to 1997. This is something the North Korean regime understands.

Whether it understands the larger forces behind the pressure on it today is another matter. The DPRK, like many other anti-colonial states, erected a wall against the backlash of a world system that had ceased to function in the 1930s, detonating catastrophe and global war. That reaction was not hard for Karl Polanyi to understand nearly 60 years ago, however difficult it might be for Eberstadt and Hunter in 1999, or any time between. Today the system has entered a newly triumphant phase, and is confident of its capacity to knock down all walls. There is no room for an economic DMZ in the capitalist market of the new century. Kim Dae Jung has said privately he would like to end the Korean War before the term of his mandate. If that is a more realistic hope than the end of North Korea, the system—which has not spared the South either in recent years—is unappeased, and lies in wait for both.

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