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North Korea's dehumanizing treatment of its citizens is hiding in plain sight

[Fred Hiatt](#)

With President Obama in Korea this week, we will hear a lot about the dangers of North Korea's nuclear aspirations.

We're unlikely to be hear about a young man named Shin Dong-hyuk, who was bred, like a farm animal, inside a North Korean prison camp after guards ordered his prisoner-parents to mate. But Shin arguably has as much to teach about Korea's past and future as about the cycle of negotiation, bluster and broken promises over the nuclear issue.

"Shin was born a slave and raised behind a high-voltage barbed-wire fence."

So writes Blaine Harden, a former East Asia correspondent for The Post, in a soon-to-be-published account of Shin's life, "Escape from Camp 14."

Harden describes a closed world of unimaginable bleakness. We often speak of someone so unfortunate as to grow up "not knowing love." Shin grew up literally not understanding concepts such as love, trust or kindness. His life consisted of beatings, hunger and labor. His only ethos was to obey guards, snitch on fellow inmates and steal food when he could. At age 14, he watched his mother and older brother executed, a display that elicited in him no pity or regret. He was raised to work until he died, probably around age 40. He knew no contemporaries who had experienced life outside Camp 14.

At 23, Shin escaped and managed, over the course of four years, to make his way through a hungry North Korea — a larger, more chaotic version of Camp 14 — into China and, eventually, the United States. He is, as far as is known, the only person born in the North Korean gulag to escape to freedom.

Improbably, his tale becomes even more gripping after his unprecedented journey, after he realizes that he has been raised as something less than human. He gradually, haltingly — and, so far, with mixed success — sets out to remake himself as a moral, feeling human being.

How is this tale even possible in the 21st century, the era of "Never Again," of the United Nations proudly (in 2005) declaring that all nations have a "responsibility to protect" civilian populations abused by their own governments?

"Fashioning a comprehensive policy to deal with North Korea's nuclear programs, its human rights abuses, and its failed economy is hardly child's play," explains Victor Cha, a Georgetown University professor, in his forthcoming book, "The Impossible State." "No administration thus far has been successful at addressing one, let alone all three."

Cha, who helped shaped Korea policy on the National Security Council under President George W. Bush, describes a nation where schoolchildren learn grammatical conjugations by reciting “We killed Americans,” “We are killing Americans,” “We will kill Americans.”

With 25 million people, it is a failed state in every way but one, which is coddling the regime and a small elite that resembles a criminal syndicate more than a traditional bureaucracy. While cautioning that predictions are risky, Cha argues that “the end is near.” The next U.S. presidential term, he predicts, is likely to face “a major crisis of the state in North Korea, and potentially unification.”

When that happens, “what is likely to be revealed is one of the worst human rights disasters in modern times.”

Only, as both books make clear, it won't be much of a revelation. Harden points out that North Korea's labor camps “have now existed twice as long as the Soviet gulag and about twelve times longer than the Nazi concentration camps.” They are easily identified in satellite photographs. One is larger than the city of Los Angeles. Altogether they house about 200,000 people.

They are visible, in other words, but people do not want to see them, and Shin's story helps explain why.

It's no surprise that China, with its own gulag archipelago, objects to any suggestion that a government can't abuse its citizens as it pleases.

But South Koreans, living in freedom, also fear a North Korean collapse — not only for the potential financial cost but also because they sense how different their erstwhile countrymen have become. Not all North Koreans live as stunted a life as Shin did inside Camp 14, but generations of isolation, propaganda and warped morality take a toll. And 20 years of post-Soviet experience have taught us that civic virtues can be far more difficult to rekindle than private markets or democratic forms.

When he watched his teacher beat a six-year-old classmate to death for stealing five grains of corn, Shin says he “didn't think much about it.”

“I did not know about sympathy or sadness,” he says. “Now that I am out, I am learning to be emotional. I have learned to cry. I feel like I am becoming human.”

But seven years after his escape, Harden writes, Shin does not believe he has reached that goal. “I escaped physically,” he says. “I haven't escaped psychologically.”

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