



The Great Leader and the Fighter Pilot: The True Story of the Tyrant Who Created North Korea and the Young Lieutenant Who Stole His Way to Freedom by Blaine Harden.

New York: Viking, 2015. Pp. x, 290. ISBN 978-0-670-01657-0.

Review by David Glenn Williams, United States Military Academy (david.williams@usma.edu).

American histories of the Korean War have grown more complex since the opening of former Soviet archives and increased access to Chinese sources over the past twenty-five years. Instead of a simplistic heroic intervention by the United States to save South Korea from a Soviet-backed North Korean invasion, the war is now better understood as a civil war rooted in the disruption of Japanese colonial rule and fought in the wider context of the early Cold War. To the many illuminating studies of the war from the Soviet, Chinese, and (North and South) Korean perspectives, journalist Blaine Harden has now contributed an informed narrative history written for a popular audience.

When Harden published his earlier biography of North Korean defector Shin Dong-hyuk,¹ he received a phone call from one Kenneth Rowe, who asked whether he “had ever heard of No Kum Sok and the MiG he stole from North Korea in 1953” (241). Harden, who learned that No Kum Sok was the birth name of Kenneth Rowe, decided “to tell the story of his defection in a book that also chronicled the rise of Kim Il Sung and explained the ferociousness of the US Air Force bombing during the Korean War” (241). The result is *The Great Leader and the Fighter Pilot*, an engaging narrative based on relevant secondary sources² and personal interviews.

The first of the book’s three parts concerns Kim Il Sung’s rise to power and political relations with Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong in the creation of North Korea. The book consists of short sections adopting each character’s perspective in loose chronological order, shifting back and forth to suggest points of intersection. The author adeptly and impartially conveys his subjects’ strengths and frailties. He introduces No Kum Sok in a lively biographical sketch, writing, for example, that

The Noguchi Corporation treated No Kum Sok’s father well and transferred him often.... The company typically housed the family in a four-room bungalow with free electricity and easy access to subsidized luxuries in the company store. As an only child (an older sister died soon after his birth), No always had his own room, and his father made certain he had a desk for his studies, a radio, and a tall bookcase. The boy grew up with treats and possessions other Korean kids could only dream about. (22)

1. *Escape from Camp 14: One Man’s Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West* (NY: Viking, 2012).

2. In particular, Kathryn Weathersby, “The Soviet Role in the Korean War: The State of Historical Knowledge,” in W. Stueck, ed., *The Korean War in World History* (Lexington: U Kentucky Pr, 2004) 61–92; “Soviet Aims in Korea and the Origins of the Korean War, 1945–1950: New Evidence from Russian Archives” [working paper] (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Int’l Ctr for Scholars, 1993); and “Should We Fear This? Stalin and the Danger of War with America” [working paper] (id., 2002).

Kim Il Sung, who had endured a harsh life as a young guerrilla fighting Japanese colonialism, saw No's father and others like him as collaborators and criminals. Harden summarizes Kim's relationship with Stalin and Mao up to the eve of war, while portraying No Kum Sok as a victim of circumstance, struggling to survive the Kim regime and ultimately defect to the United States.

Part II describes the wartime experiences of Kim Il Sung and No Kum Sok during the fierce US aerial bombing campaign.³ No, as a North Korean naval cadet, personally observed that

Like mowing a lawn, the destruction of Chongjin was a steady, systematic, and unhurried chore that moved block by block southwest to northeast. Again, the bombers did not bring a fighter escort. Again, they did not need one. North Korean aircraft did not interrupt their work, nor were any anti-aircraft guns fired. In his foxhole, No could see how the residents of Chongjin responded to the bombing. They did not evacuate before it started, nor did they flee as explosions devoured their neighborhoods. They stayed in their homes and apartments, dying by the thousands. (69-70)

Postwar estimates indicate that nearly a hundred thousand people perished—"65 percent of Chongjin had been obliterated" (70). As Maj. Gen. Emmett O'Donnell put it, "the purpose of the air campaign ... was to deliver a very severe blow ... and go to work burning five major cities in North Korea to the ground" (67). The intent was to destroy morale and end the war sooner, thus saving lives. But then as now, "Americans did not read or hear much about it, and the wholesale killing of North Korean civilians never embarrassed politicians in the United States. It was a nonissue" (68). Harden rightly stresses that North Koreans have never forgotten the carnage of the US bombing campaign, which expended "more than thirty-two thousand tons of napalm ... about double the amount that fell on Japan in 1945" (96). The Kim dynasty has made this a central motivation in keeping North Korea in a constant state of military readiness, ensuring the dictatorial regime's grip on power (96).

The United States dominated the air war throughout the conflict. Neither the North Koreans nor the Chinese, who entered the war in October 1950, possessed a modern air force. Moreover, Stalin feared that openly committing Soviet air forces would trigger a larger war against the United States, for which the USSR was not prepared. After considerable political maneuvering, Mao committed his ground forces without a guarantee of Soviet air support, though Stalin did help the Chinese logistically and trained North Korean pilots.

The dramatic turn of events after the Americans' Inchon landing and decision to cross the 38th parallel confronted Kim Il Sung with the likely annihilation of his regime. Mao had decided to back Kim for various reasons, but the battlefield situation forced him to deploy Chinese troops earlier than planned. A mixture of US hubris and Peng Dehuai's adroit tactics allowed Chinese forces to deliver a crushing blow to the Americans and regain control of North Korean territory. Harden argues convincingly that Kim Il Sung, against all odds, now began to inhabit the myth of the Great Leader just when he felt most strongly the sting of humiliation over the destruction of his country and his loss of control of the war to Mao and Peng. Ceasing his sycophantic praise for Stalin, "Kim began to emerge from his wartime funk and assert his predatory instincts" (91). Free of the burden of directing the war effort, he ruthlessly consolidated political power, blaming and liquidating potential rivals for his own failures.

3. Drawing esp. on Conrad C. Crane's *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2000) and Robert F. Futrell's official history, *The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950-1953* (NY: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1961).

No Kum Sok was selected for pilot training at a base inside China, where he also learned to navigate the perilous waters of Communist politics. Never a true believer in Kim's cult, he decided early on to defect at his first opportunity. Harden recreates the constant risks he ran:

For North Korean pilots in Manchuria, the nagging fear of being shot down by American [F-86] Sabres was compounded by on-the-ground paranoia about each other. Like his fellow pilots, No worried about every word he said, even as he spied on his colleagues, looking for embarrassing missteps to denounce. The finger-pointing turned his stomach, but as vice-chairman of the party cell in his battalion he was obligated to do it energetically and with venom. (148)

As No played the part of Kim loyalist on the ground, the air war between Russian "honchos" and American "aces" escalated, especially along the Yalu River ("MiG Alley"), where No experienced his first dog-fights, American bombing and strafing inside China, and the psychological stresses of the air war. By mid-1952, however, when the Russians were pulled back, "their mastery of the MiG and appetite for confrontation had remade the air war: providing essential cover for Chinese supply routes, seizing superiority over MiG Alley, and forcing the Americans to rush their best fighter jets to Korea" (127). A year later, Stalin's death and the election of President Dwight Eisenhower altered the political landscape and led the belligerent parties to sign an armistice in July 1953.

No moved to a base outside Pyongyang in September 1953. His chance to defect finally materialized on a sunny morning when he took off in his MiG-15, cut radio contact, and made a daring landing at Kimpo airfield outside of Seoul. Harden relates No's subsequent reaction to the US Government's efforts to exploit him for propaganda and intelligence purposes, including a controversial reward program—"Operation Moolah"—that promised \$100,000 to any communist pilot who delivered a MiG. President Eisenhower disapproved of the reward program and the White House tried to convince No to turn the money down. Harden sheds new light here on the inner workings of early Cold War intelligence and propaganda efforts, while humanizing No Kum Sok's personal story. He correctly observes that the sensationalism surrounding No's defection was short-lived and of little long-term value to the United States. For his part, Kim Il Sung embarked on a sweeping consolidation of power, bringing the cult of the Great Leader to full fruition and establishing a family dynasty that still reigns in North Korea.

The Great Leader vividly chronicles Kim Il Sung's rise to power and No Kum Sok's defection, against the backdrop of the devastating air war in Korea. That said, its author might usefully have explored whether the direct links between Kim and No were more than coincidental. No's experience was illustrative but not unique up to the point of his defection. And, too, the preference for narrative over analysis obscures the role of contingency and overemphasizes the relationship of the two main characters. Nevertheless, Blaine Harden has judiciously distilled current Korean War historiography in a book accessible to a general audience. By inducing his readers to imagine themselves in similar circumstances, he shows that an individual's actions can have enduring consequences, both intended and unintended.