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# The opaque state

What lies within the world's most secretive country? Photojournalist **Julia Leeb** hopes to shed some light on the people of North Korea. She talks to **Oliver Atwell**

**A performance at the Mangyongdae Children's Palace in Pyongyang**

**T**hrough western eyes, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) can seem like an almost alien land, one defined by stories of dictatorship, moribund economy, labour camps and irrationality. Yet according to Andrei Lankov, author of *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*, our perception of North Korea is one warped by overheated rhetoric. Lankov suggests that North Korea is anything but irrational. This is, after all, the last standing Stalinist regime and it is one that has survived against all the odds.

What may appear to us in the West to be a country overseen by a mad and unpredictable regime is, in fact, a land that remains in absolute possession of its faculties. A political fossil it may be, but through a careful application of shrewd Machiavellian politics, North Korea has remained a land that is still able to extract support from other countries. It is unlikely to remain that way for long, but for now, despite appearances, North Korea seems to know exactly what it is doing.

The aforementioned preconceptions of the DPRK are exactly what drove photojournalist

Julia Leeb and two friends to explore this hermit kingdom. Travelling under a tourist visa – photojournalists are rarely allowed to enter North Korea – Julia and her companions toured the country, cameras in hand and strict guides in tow, to see what they could learn about the 24 million individuals who live under the watchful eye of Kim Jong-un's regime. That's the key to Julia's new book *North Korea: Anonymous Country* – the people.

'North Koreans are often referred to as "mindless robots",' says Julia. '[During my time in North Korea] I was looking for the human factor; the individuals; the special moment. And indeed, North Koreans are people who are very much alive. Since North Korea is a society we barely know, that's hard to imagine.'

'Due to the isolation of the country, you have very limited access to officially published news by North Korea itself. The information published by the Korean Central News Agency, for example, seems extremely outlandish to us. I didn't read travel reports because I wanted to have an unbiased view and form my own experiences.'

## On tour

The images that make up *North Korea: Anonymous Country* (which is divided into the three





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### Julia Leeb

Julia Leeb is a photojournalist from Germany. The emphasis of her work is on areas in political upheaval. For example, she has undertaken long-term projects in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, the Gaza Strip and Iran. Her pictures from war-torn countries have been published in numerous publications, including *The Huffington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *La Stampa*.

Sections of architecture, culture and people) were taken during two trips. The first was in 2012 (specifically to visit the Arirang Festival) and the second in 2013. While the two journeys were conducted under the close scrutiny of appointed guides, the second trip is notable for the air of uncertainty that hung in the air. Such was the paranoia permeating the country that Julia and her companions had their passports taken from them for the duration of the journey.

'When I arrived in North Korea in 2013, the overall situation was very tense,' she explains. 'The armistice agreement between North and South Korea had been dissolved, so officially the two Koreas were in a state of war. Once I touched down on North Korean soil, I couldn't make any phone calls and I had no access to newspapers, television or the internet. Since several countries had issued travel warnings, there were barely any other foreigners who could give me information about the outside world. North Korea even recommended the evacuation of foreign embassies. The special economic zone was closed and people were becoming nervous. Due to the total isolation, I really didn't know if there would be war or not.'

'The first time I visited North



## The Arirang Festival

'The culture section of *North Korea: Anonymous Country* covers the DPRK's annual extravaganza – the Arirang Festival,' says Julia. 'This year's festival has been cancelled due to unknown reasons [official word is that it is because 2014 is not a year with any major anniversary]. It's the most elusive event I've ever seen in my life. More than 100,000 people participate and I don't know how they organise it. Most people don't use cars or buses – they just walk. [When you're watching it] you don't know if you are dreaming or awake. It's

difficult to describe. You zoom in on hundreds of thousands of people, each carrying a card. The precise mass choreography depicts symbols of the state's Juche ideology, which stands for political sovereignty, economic self-sufficiency and military independence. The synchronised dancing, the human mosaics and the meticulously coordinated waves formed by thousands of participants have even made it into the *Guinness World Records* book. In my eyes, Arirang serves as motivation and enhances a common identity.'



A torch that lights up at night crowns the Juche tower in Pyongyang. Often it is one of only a few light sources in North Korea's capital



Korea, words like "war" and "self-defence" had no part in common conversations. The second time, "war" was not abstract any more. It became something concrete.'

Each of Julia's trips lasted about a week. During this time she went mountain hiking, visited caves, saw the border twice and visited a solitary army major in the hills who showed her the boundary wall – a structure whose existence has apparently been denied by South Korea.

'I saw agricultural cooperatives, had a night picnic eating local mussels, and inspected factories, hospitals, kindergartens and schools,' says Julia. 'I travelled thousands of kilometres through the country and never stayed in a place for more than one night. North Korea is definitely a country with a lot to explore even if you're on a tight schedule.'

### Restrictions and rules

During these two trips to North Korea, Julia's central aim was to get

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to the heart of what it is like to exist within the strange cult of personality of Kim Jong-un. The 24 million citizens and various visiting foreigners find themselves subject to a series of restrictions and rules, many of which affected Julia's ability to photograph freely.

'Like in many other countries, you're not allowed to take pictures of soldiers or military institutions,' says Julia. 'North Korea also has some very specific rules regarding photographs of the "dear leader" statues. The cult of personality is a substitution for religion. You are therefore only allowed to photograph the entire figure and never take pictures from behind. Doing so would be considered a lack of respect.'

However, Julia did find herself

Above: A ruler cult with religious overtones. You can take pictures of the statues, but only the entire figure and only from the front

Right: Following the rampant destruction during the Korean War, the cities were rebuilt and the buildings became a symbol of solidarity

able to capture the daily lives of the North Korean people. One touching scene shows a photographer taking wedding pictures on a couple's special day. Other images consist of the kinds of scenes one could expect to find in their own city: citizens making their way through the city on foot or commuting on the train. It is this seeming mundanity that makes the scenes so compelling. Their lives look not unlike our own.

'As we all know, the country is currently politically and ideologically isolated and faces hard sanctions,' says Julia. 'In this book, I wanted to show different aspects of this exceptional country. My goal was to leave the political overkill pictures aside and concentrate more on the people and their way of life. The viewer has the opportunity to form his or her own opinions.'

With this in mind, a question arises: how do the people of North Korea believe the rest of the world views them?

'I was asked this question by my guide,' says Julia. 'My response, trying to be as polite as possible, was that North Korea does not have the best reputation in the outside world. I told him that Westerners see his country as an aggressor and he was shocked. Since North Koreans are cut off from the outside world, their perspective is different to that of people in other countries.'

'According to North Koreans, the outside world acts aggressively towards them, making them feel constantly threatened. After some conversations, it became pretty clear that North Korea sees itself as the political playground of three world powers. This argument also serves to justify the nuclear weapons and their existence.'







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▶ They see it as a necessary means of survival – North Korea has a rather defensive nationalism.’

### In Pyongyang

According to Julia, North Korean architecture has a unique status. Nearly all the cities in North Korea were totally destroyed during the Korean War (25 June 1950-27 July 1953). Reconstruction entered the history books as the pinnacle of solidarity between socialist nations.

‘Since the planning authority left nothing to chance, the model city of Pyongyang took shape on the drawing board,’ Julia explains. ‘All-pervasive symmetry, deliberate lines of sight and colossal design vocabulary are intended to affect people’s perceptions and thereby build a new society.

‘Symbols such as torches, magnolia blossoms, hammers, sickles and paintbrushes are everywhere representing the state ideology and acting as propaganda. North Koreans are accustomed to the overarching importance of public space and monumentality of architecture, like in the days of the Pharaohs.’

Living within the shadow of such overwhelmingly ideologically led

architecture, the people of North Korea are able to live in a hermetically sealed box. North Korea is a country that perpetuates strict discipline – something the people of the DPRK must face from a very early age.

‘Children in North Korea grow up in a collective and are conditioned very early,’ says Julia. ‘In a kindergarten, for example, I witnessed a baby orchestra by three-year-olds.

‘The Mangyongdae Children’s Palace (a public facility where pioneer members – children – can engage in extra-curricular activities, such as learning music, foreign languages, computing skills and sports) is another symbol for extreme infantile professionalism. North Korean children act remarkably mature.’

In the end, Julia’s trip to North Korea passed without incident. The group’s passports were returned and Julia went home to build an image of North Korea through the vast array of images that she had stockpiled on her journey throughout the hermit kingdom. As we now know, the cataclysm of all-out war was avoided and once again North Korea worked its magic to keep the global political

### In front of the Minsok Folk Hotel in Kaesong

wolves from its tightly shut doors.

Perhaps the greatest virtue of *North Korea: Anonymous Country* is in its portrait of the North Korean people. Rather than being the kinds of mindless puppets as we have been led to believe by the skewed perspective of the global press, the people of North Korea are, in the words of 13-year-old North Korean defector Park Yeon-mi, ‘normal people like you and I’.

Yet despite this, North Korea still remains a fascinating mystery, particularly to Western audiences. It is, after all, as Julia says, the world’s most secretive country.

‘We know so very little about the people living there,’ she concludes. ‘Even for the international secret services, North Korea remains a dark spot. The people of North Korea live nearly untouched by globalisation, in their own calendar, in a time capsule. A journey to North Korea is like travelling to a parallel universe.’

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*North Korea: Anonymous Country* by Julia Leeb is published by teNeues and costs £65 (ISBN 978-3-83279-843-7). The book also contains interactive features with exclusive music composed by Xenia Maculan. Visit [www.teneues.com](http://www.teneues.com) for details