The Korean war

Tyrantand truant

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.

T

HE vain featsofKim Il Sung, the Korean

guerrilla leader who fought the Japa-

nese occupiersfrom Manchuria, were irre-

sistible to the destitute North Koreans who,

by the 1940s, had suffered nearly four de-

cades of brutal colonisation. They did not

know the truth: that Kim lost his war, fled

eastand laterslinked home in a Soviet uni-

form, kowtowing to Stalin until his death.

Nor did they see that Kim’s monstrous re-

gime, which would last another 41 years

until he died in 1994, wasbuilton fiction.

In 1945 No Kum Sok was one of those

who thought that young Kim, the Soviet

poodle, was a sham. In the boy’s home-

town, Russian soldiers ransacked and

raped, and hisfamilyfell on hard times. Mr

No longed to escape to America. Posing as

afalse communist, spyingand snitching to

prove hisfervour, he became the youngest

pilot in the North Korean air force. In 1950

the Soviet-backed North invaded the

South, promptinga UN-backed American-

led force to step in. The Chinese, in turn,

supported the North. Just afterthe conflict

ended, MrNo flewa SovietMiG-15 jetover

the borderand defected to the South.

Both men’s lives in the nascent North

Korean state are deftly woven together by

Blaine Harden, an American journalist,

who has made good use ofMr No’s mem-

oirs, aswell asnewlydeclassified air-force

intelligence reports, presidential papers

and Chinese and Soviet archives. The his-

toryofthe warunfoldsatthe top, as Stalin,

Mao and Kim (mostly“stewingin hisirrel-

evance”) jockey, bickerand bootlickfor in-

fluence. It is played out at the bottom

through MrNo, who hearsofthe warat his

naval academy in Chongjin, in the north-

east, and goesto China to train asa pilot.

North Korea was deeply vulnerable

from the skies. Three weeks into the war,

almost all of its combat planes had been

strafed; America described its early air-

force campaign as “leisurely”. Its bombers

destroyed more than four-fifths of the

North’s infrastructure. The destruction of

Chongjin, which Mr No witnessed, was a

“steady, systematic and unhurried chore”.

Within two monthsthe B-29 bomberssaid

theywere runningoutoftargets.

If China fought America to a bloody

stalemate on the ground, in the air the So-

viet Union’s best pilots fought its air force

o a draw. By late 1951 about 2,500 MiGs

prowled the skies above a section of the

Sino-Korean border, known as “MiG Al-

ley”. Stalin wanted his meddling kept qui-

et, so Soviet pilots flew without identifica-

tion papers, in Chinese flight uniforms

aboard jetswith Chinese markings. Ameri-

ca wasnotfooled, butitchose to ignore the

charade—a move, Mr Harden says, that

mayhave kept“the cold warcool”.

America, too, engaged in deceit. Mr No

says he saw American pilots cross into

Manchuria, in violation of the rules of

combat, to attackenemy planes, including

those ofhiscolleagues, astheylanded (the

air force would try to cover this up for de-

cades). They also dumped over 32,000

tonnes of napalm on the North, nearly

twice asmuch asfell on Japan in 1945. Ene-

mysoldierslived on rice, so the Americans

blewup damsto flood the paddyfields.

How Mr No witnessed the savagery

and still clungto hisadmiration for Ameri-

ca is not quite spelt out. But Mr Harden

doesmake clearthatMrNo’sflightwasfor

freedom and not for the American cash

thatawaited him underthe termsofOper-

ation Moolah—a bribe of $100,000 (about

$900,000 today) set up in 1953 for the first

pilotto defectin a MiG. An American gen-

eral called MrNo’sdefection the country’s

most “spectacular” piece of psychological

warfare against the communists; Mr No

had neverheard ofthe reward.

The destruction ofthe North prompted

much guilt across the socialist world,

which Kim was quick to prey on. In 1954

China spent more than 3% of its budget

helping the North. The devastation be-

came Kim’s most potent propaganda. He

found in itthe trope thatwould continue to

justifyhispeople’ssufferingfordecades to

come: that foreign powers—chiefly Ameri-

ca—had alwaysbeen to blame.