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The North Korean famine of 1994–1998 marked a period of mass starvation that resulted in an estimated 600,000–1,000,000 deaths.\(^1\) From the outset, the North Korean government pointed to the natural disasters of 1995–1997 as the famine’s root cause, with the decline of Soviet aid to North Korea after 1991 contributing further to the reduced food supply. Neither were developments precipitated by the North Korean state, which therefore suggested that the North Korean government was not to blame. This, inherently, was suspicious; while natural disasters and aid reduction can and do result in extreme food scarcities, they attain famine status only through misguided human actions (or the lack thereof) in correcting existing shortages (The International Rescue Committee 2024).

One way to understand the causes of famine is through Amartya Sen’s ‘entitlement approach.’ Entitlement, by Sen’s definition, refers to “the ability of people to command food through the legal means available in the society” (Sen 1981, 45). Starvation, according to Sen, occurs when such entitlements fail (i.e. people are unable to access the food that is available), and can occur

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\(^1\) This is an estimate taken from Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland’s *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (2007), where the famine’s impact is quantified with various statistics from the World Food Programme, the Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement, and the Korean Ministry of Unification, among other sources. The data for such sources was collated based on ‘on the ground’ experience in North Korea during the famine (e.g. the WFP), or interviews with North Korean defectors who had similar experiences, making them the most reliable figures. Some estimates, however, can go much higher than Haggard and Noland’s estimates, with some sources citing figures as high as 3.5 million.
even when there is little change to the aggregate food supply. Sen’s theory therefore suggests that the North Korean government was to blame for the famine of 1994-1998. The collapse of North Korea’s public distribution system (PDS) and the North Korean government’s misallocation of aid are significant entitlement failures that arose as a direct consequence of government action. Ultimately, the North Korean government’s failure to respond effectively to external shocks (such as natural disasters) showcases structural vulnerabilities within its centrally planned socio-economic system.

To fully understand how the North Korean government was at fault, the North Korean famine must be situated within contemporary historical developments to provide a comprehensive picture of the famine’s causes. One such development was the Soviet Union’s geopolitical shift away from North Korea. Following the Korean War of 1950-1953, North Korea had received considerable aid from the Soviet Union as a new member of the Socialist Bloc, with Soviet aid comprising 34% of North Korea’s state budget in 1954 (Gray and Lee 2021, 127). The USSR’s economic difficulties in 1985, however, resulted in Moscow’s economic and political abandonment of North Korea; the Soviet Union reneged on the previous, heavily subsidised ‘friendship

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2 It should be noted that Sen also considers other factors, such as other macroeconomic developments like inflation (Sen 64), fluctuations in global markets (42), and governments’ economic policies (160) as possible contributors to entitlement failure.

3 The Soviet Union took advantage of South Korea’s Nordpolitik (i.e. ‘Northern Policy’), which normalised diplomatic relations between the USSR and South Korea. Moscow received a $3 billion dollar loan as a result and essentially prioritised economic benefits over their ideological and geo-political stance, which had been the USSR’s prime concern since the Korean War of 1950-1953. See Gray and Lee (2021) p. 129.
prices’ for Pyongyang and demanded that North Korea pay ‘market prices’ for imports, a policy that caused Soviet imports to plummet from $175 million in 1990 to less than $10 million in 1992 (Eberstadt 2007, 75–7).

The immediate effect of Soviet abandonment was a significant reduction in agricultural productivity. Given that only 15-20% of North Korean land is arable (Natsios 2001, 11-12), Pyongyang had depended heavily on the fuel, fertiliser, and pesticide/herbicide imports that the Soviet Union provided, and this newfound deficiency directly impacted North Korea’s ability to maintain adequate levels of agricultural production (Cha 2018, 137). North Korea’s ‘Juche’ (i.e. national self-sufficiency) policy had not extended to its relations with the USSR nor to its agricultural sector, a vulnerability that now left North Korean agriculture devoid of its necessary material inputs. Instead of addressing the issue, the state chose to repress demand by initiating a “let’s eat two meals a day” campaign in 1991 (Gray and Lee 2021, 131). This campaign, combined with the progressive decomposition of the PDS, indicates mismanaged food scarcities that contributed to North Korea’s descent into famine.

In addition, the effect of the Soviet Union’s geopolitical shift was compounded by a series of floods that occurred between 1995-1997. Flooding was the government’s official explanation for the famine, citing the loss of 2

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4 Oil, in particular, had been essential to North Korea’s petrochemical factories, whose fertiliser production decreased 24% from 1.7 million tons in 1989 to 1.3 million tons in 1994. See Phillip H. Park (2002), p. 114.
million tons of grain, 300,000 hectares of cropland destroyed, and 5.4 million people displaced as the cause of food shortages (Haggard and Noland 2007, 34). It should be noted, however, that such claims were likely exaggerated. Some scholars posit that the crop losses of 1995-1996 were insured, presumably by the Socialist Bloc, while a survey by the UN proposed that only 500,000 people were displaced (Haggard and Noland 2007, 265). Regardless, North Korea did experience floods; in 1995, 877 mm of precipitation was recorded within 7 hours in North Hwanghae Province, while similar occurrences in 1996 destroyed an estimated 85% of the country’s hydroelectric capacity (Smith 2005, 67). This, then, was significant not only for destroying the tunnels that housed the state’s grain reserves, but also for leaving North Korea unable to generate electricity — a resource that the agricultural sector heavily depended on for irrigation, among other things. It is therefore true that flooding led to shortages in the existing food supply and reduced North Korea’s ability to recover agriculturally, creating conditions in which the government’s entitlement failures would flourish.

The decline in Soviet aid and the flooding of 1995–1997 created food shortages that portended the possibility of famine, but the actuality of starvation (and its uneven distribution) was brought about by the state’s entitlement failures — the most significant of which was the collapse of the public distribution system (PDS). The PDS is a welfare system that nationalises production and redistributes heavily subsidised basic necessities to the North Korean people, which includes grain (and other foods), clothing,
house appliances, and seeds and sprouts for collective farms (York 2023). Distribution centres require ration books, a small amount of money, and coupons from one’s workplace (certifying that an individual’s work duty has been fulfilled) in exchange for entitlements (Demick 2009, 72). These entitlements are allocated in accordance to one’s songbun (i.e. class), as well as the perceived importance of one’s work to the state, creating a comprehensive political system of entitlements that governs life in North Korea (Natsios 2021, 92).

The PDS’s centrality initiated a collapse of socio-economic structures as the state increasingly prioritised the core class in its distribution of limited food supplies. In 1997, a survey of 1,019 refugees carried out by the Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement (KBSM) recorded 93% of interviewees reporting that regular distribution by the PDS had stopped by 1996 (Haggard and Noland 2007, 58). Later, in September 1998, the John Hopkins School of Public Health surveyed 440 North Korean refugees, all of whom reported a similar decrease in rations in the 1990s: in 1987, urban populations had received 585 grams of grain per day, which declined to 150 grams per day by 1994, and 30 grams per day by 1997 (Haggard and Noland 2007, 59).

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5 The songbun is a system of class designation in North Korea that contains three main groups: the core class (‘tomatoes’ in the popular parlance; Communist ‘red’ inside and out), the wavering class (‘apples’; ‘red’ on the outside but not on the inside), and the hostile class (‘grapes’; soft and easily corruptible). There are over 50 additional sub-groups, but the songbun system is determined almost entirely by heredity, with only downward mobility possible (with very rare exceptions).

6 The following figures should be taken with a margin of error to account for class differences within the songbun, which, in effect, translated to differences in grain allocation.
Respondents to the KBSM and John Hopkins surveys came from a variety of North Korean provinces, with proportionally more from North and South Hamgyong.

While respondents from the KBSM and John Hopkins School do not represent the North Korean population as a whole, they serve to provide a window through which the collapse of the PDS can be understood. Both surveys indicate the PDS’s failure by 1994 to provide a basic, sustaining level of calories per day (1,600 calories, or approximately 457 grams of food), eliminating the primary source of reliable food. Left unsupplemented, this failure resulted in starvation when alternate solutions (such as fleeing the country) were not found. This illustrates not only the entitlement failures that occurred in the aftermath of food shortages, but also the disproportionate effect of such failures across the North Korean populace. Indeed, the very status of the surveyed refugees is, in itself, indicative of their vulnerability as a lower social class within a socially stratified system of entitlements.

Because the PDS provided the sole means of obtaining food for 60-70% of the populace (Cha 2018, 138), many, in light of the state’s increasing neglect, were unable to find alternative methods of commanding food, especially in the cities. In one example, Andrew Natsios, an aid worker for World Vision who visited North Korea in 1997, describes his visit to a kindergarten in the city of Huichon, where six children (out of a class of eighteen) were found to be suffering from acute malnutrition. Outside of Huichon, Natsios observed hundreds of people along his route into the city.
foraging wild plants from the countryside (Natsios 2001, 29–30). Natsios’s experiences appear to echo Sen’s conclusions that starvation (and ultimately, famine) varied depending on individuals’ ability to command alternate sources of food. Residents of Huichon, an industrial city, likely relied wholly on the PDS for food, unable to access other methods for survival that rural populations could. Foraging, as evidenced by Natsios’s account, could be used as a supplement to or substitute for grain allocations where the PDS had collapsed; other means of obtaining food also included cultivating crops on private plots of land and withholding food production from the state, all of which were actions limited to the countryside (Demick 2009, 135). While Natsios’ observations are merely a micro-statistic and are not intended to represent entitlement failures across North Korea, his account highlights the shortages’ disproportionate effect on urban populations, as well as the government’s role in cultivating such starvation by failing to safeguard the PDS.

It should be noted, however, that Pyongyang was largely an exception to the entitlement failures of the PDS and its heightened severity in cities. While the PDS had collapsed in 95.5% of North Korea by 1995 (ReliefWeb 2023), Natsios, upon visiting “the best school in Pyongyang” (according to one of his hosts) in 1997, remarked on the children’s exceptional physical condition (Natsios 2001, 34–35). When contrasted with Natsios’s observations of malnutrition in Huichon, the remarkable health of the children in Pyongyang appears to suggest that food was available—and perhaps even
plentiful—but only accessible to those who occupied a certain ‘place’ in North Korea’s songbun. In this way, Pyongyang was sheltered from the entitlement failures that caused starvation to be so severe, especially amongst urban populations. In prioritising the necessities of Pyongyang’s ‘core class’ over others, the North Korean government served to divert entitlements from similar dependents, thereby enabling the entitlement failures that resulted from the PDS’ collapse.

The state’s preference for Pyongyang, combined with the unequal experience of starvation after the PDS’ collapse, provides an illuminating example of Sen’s statement that “No substantial famine has occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press” (Sen 2023, 8). In the context of the North Korean famine, Sen’s statement suggests that the non-core classes starved for two main reasons: one, they had no mechanism by which to make their voice heard, and two, the state was not held accountable by the rule of law. The PDS is, in itself, a political structure that commands almost complete dependence from its populace; its collapse—a direct result of the state’s inequitable prioritisation of the core class—highlights the increased likelihood of famine in the absence of democratic structures, where the state overwhelmingly controls who gets what. Blame for these entitlement failures, then, falls squarely on the North Korean state.

In addition to the PDS’ collapse, the North Korean government’s misallocation of aid (on a both a centralised and decentralised level) also magnified existing entitlement failures and accelerated the state’s descent into
famine. The North Korean government had made an appeal to the international community and received $2.3 billion in assistance from 1995-2005 (Cha 2018, 137), but had consumed such aid as a form of revenue, reducing commercial food imports and diverting food savings towards North Korea’s ‘Military First’ policy. Indeed, North Korea spent 25% of its GDP on the military in the early 1990s (Eberstadt 1999) as waning Soviet aid and natural disasters reduced the country’s agricultural capacity; in 1999, too, North Korea purchased 40 MiG-21 fighter aircrafts and 8 military helicopters from Kazakhstan (Haggard and Noland 2005, 16). This significantly diverted entitlements from people who might otherwise have obtained such food supplies through the PDS, showcasing the North Korean government’s conscious attempt to prioritise ideology over the starvation of its people. The North Korean government’s diversion of resources is therefore a mismanagement of existing entitlements that had catastrophic consequences within its socially-stratified society, again making the state to blame for exacerbating the famine.

Diversions of North Korean aid also occurred on a local, decentralised level, where lower level officials reallocated aid away from vulnerable groups and towards the market. In 1997, for example, the UN had begun to warn NGOs against sending medicinal and food aid to children’s centres, which saw

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7 North Korea’s ‘Military First’ (i.e. Son’gun) policy was initiated by Kim Jong Il in 1994 and elevated the military into a primary position within the state, a guiding ideology that resulted in the diversion of limited resources (e.g. food, capital) to the military. Son’gun, during the North Korean famine, saw immense military investments despite evidence of starvation.
little improvement in the children’s malnutrition levels (often ranging from moderate to acute) from the year before. Because aid workers from NGOs and the United Nations Children’s Fund were prohibited from staying at children’s centres permanently, North Korean workers often took home the centres’ food aid to feed their own struggling families and supplement their own wages, which had plummeted to almost nothing by 1997 (Natsios 2001, 32). Such actions indicate North Koreans’ attempts to access food sources where the state had failed to provide them. While foreign donors had prioritised the vulnerable within North Korea’s population, including children, the destitute, and the elderly, the North Korean government had sought to protect its key constituencies (e.g. Pyongyang)—a struggle for political survival that was subsequently replicated across lower, local level hierarchies. The North Korean workers’ actions represent an entitlement failure that, in a closed socialist economy with nowhere else to turn for food, was directly facilitated by the state.

Aid was also diverted into markets that emerged to supplement the shortcomings of the PDS, a desperate move by people who had been largely abandoned by the state. This is demonstrated in the experience of Song Hee-suk, who, having defected from North Korea in 2002, described how the worsening of the famine was accompanied by an increasing amount of food at markets in Chongjin. Vegetables had been cultivated on “secret gardens” on mountains within the countryside, and white rice began to appear in “big 40-kilo burlap sacks imprinted with Roman letters (UN, EFP, EU).” Rice in
particular was being sold for profit by somebody in the military (Demick 2009, 155). Song’s account is supplemented by video evidence dated to August 2003 from a Japanese NGO (RENK),\(^8\) which shows scenes of food aid from South Korea, the United States, and the WFP being sold in Hyesan City, Ryanggang Province (Haggard and Noland 2007, 119). The abundance of food that Song and RENK describe appears incongruent with the levels of food scarcity associated with famine and illustrates the unequal impact of starvation throughout North Korea—it befell only those unable to command alternate sources of food within the newly flourishing market economy. Chongjin and Hyesan City are only two examples, but they serve useful in highlighting the diversion of entitlements to emerging markets. Local officials played a role in cultivating these markets; they were not ‘secret’ markets but took place in plain view, which suggests that aid on the local level was left largely unregulated and subject to market forces. Markets provided individuals with an alternate method of commanding food, particularly in the cities, though this method was restricted to those with sufficient capital to begin with. Markets were the result of ordinary North Koreans attempting to fend for themselves and represented the North Korean government’s own self-interest in political survival instead of accounting for vulnerable groups within the populace.

\(^8\) The NGO is called Rescue the North Korean People Urgent Action Network (RENK), which collaborates with and supports North Koreans who have taken footage of market activity in North Korea, most notably by concealing cameras in bags; see Haggard and Noland (2007) p. 119.
To conclude, the collapse of the PDS and the misallocation of aid indicate how the state’s actions either caused or compounded its people’s ability to access food. Certainly a variety of external circumstances played a role in decreasing food supply, but the degree of culpability that can be assigned to external vs. internal factors is ultimately 20-80. North Korea’s totalitarian political structure allowed the state to inequitably favour the core class without due accountability, a conscious decision that caused the starvation of many. The famine is also still significant today, as food distribution throughout North Korea remains highly unequal and, at times, inconsistent. In 2008, a World Food Programme (WFP) survey of 250 North Korean households found that two-thirds continued to use grass and weeds to supplement their diet (Demick 2009, 114). A similar survey in 2019 found 40% of the population (11 million) to be undernourished, with 1 in 5 children suffering from chronic malnutrition (The Guardian 2019). Neither example supports the image of prosperous abundance that Pyongyang continues to eagerly champion, a further indication of the extraordinarily fragile system on which so many within North Korea rely. As evidenced by the North Korean famine, starvation in North Korea occurs because of inequitable supply distribution rather than food supply shortages. Since all economies experience external and internal shocks at one time or another, these vulnerabilities promise future famines if the North Korean state does not correct its socio-economic inequalities and equitably distribute basic necessities to its population.
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