

What was life like in North Korea during the 1990s for the average person? How do people defect from North Korea and where do they go? How did the current leader Kim Jong un rise to power? How does North Korea's nuclear weapons program affect the future of the international community? We will learn the answers to these questions and more in today's episode part three of North Korea 101 the last 100 ish years in North Korea Welcome to wiser world a podcast for busy people who need a refresher on all things world here We explore different regions of the globe giving you the facts and context you need to think historically about current events I truly believe that the more we learn about the world the more The more we embrace our shared humanity.

I'm your host Allie Roper. Thanks for being here

Hey, i'm back with another installment in this series of the last 100 years history in a few high profile countries making a lot of news right now Last time we covered taiwan and today we're in part three Of north korea and next up we have iran. All right, let's finish out north korea today We ended part two with kim jong il Inheriting a famine this is in the 1990s Not that long ago.

Let's talk about life in North Korea a little bit more during this time from part two We learned that the famine was absolutely terrible But the people who didn't die of starvation or other diseases had to find ways to keep food on the table I talked about them foraging for food fighting edible weeds hunting frogs trying to steal copper to trade for food but But I want to give you a little bit more background on this.

I'm going to quote from a few books, quote, people have described how they would wake up each day and immediately check with their neighbors to see who was still alive. How many remain from a population that officially peaked at over 24 million? No one is quite sure. Some refugees say that official registries record less than 19 million as factories shut Down, and schools and hospitals ceased to operate, many abandoned their homes in search of food, and some headed toward China.

End of quote. From one book, which talks about a future defector named Miran, the author writes, quote, It is axiomatic that one death is a tragedy and a thousand is a statistic. So Miran, when she didn't realize is that her indifference was an acquired survival skill. In order to get through the 1990s alive, one had to suppress any impulse to share food.

End quote. To avoid going insane, one had to stop caring. In time, Miron would learn how to walk around a dead body on the street without paying much notice. End of quote. People did not go passively to their deaths. Quote, when the public distribution system was cut off, they were forced to tap their deepest wells of creativity to feed themselves.

They devised traps out of blood. Buckets and string to catch small animals in the field. They would drape nets over their balconies to snare sparrows. They educated themselves in the nutritive properties of plants. They stripped the inner, the sweet inner bark of pine trees to grind into a fine powder that could be used in place of flour.

On the beaches, people dug out shellfish from the sand and filled buckets with seaweed. And when the authorities in 1995 erected fences along the beach, ostensibly to keep out spies but more likely to prevent people from catching fish that the state company wanted to control, people began going out to the unguarded cliffs over the seas with long rakes tied together to hoist up seaweed.

By 1998, it is estimated as much as 20 percent of the population had died from the famine, though it's really impossible to tell. Between 1996 and 2005, North Korea received 2.4 billion worth of food in aid, much of it from the United States. They wanted the aid, but not the people who came with it. Many aid agencies were restricted to Pyongyang, the capital, and other areas that were carefully groomed to make North Korea look better.

Much better than it was, but many agencies finally pulled out because they couldn't verify where the aid was going. And there are quite a few stories of North Korean defectors saying that they were really confused when they'd see these bags of white rice trucked into their cities, which they hadn't seen white rice for years and years, and how it would have U.

S. on the side of the bag. Why would their enemies be sending them food? And people began to question and put together And maybe what they were being told wasn't true. The worst of the famine appeared to be over by the late 1990s. So it lasted well over 10 years. Many speculate it's because there were far fewer mouths to feed.

And this leads to how the famine shifted the North Korean economy from a more collectivist system into a freer market. Most of it was not strictly legal, but people were hungry and almost anyone who is starving would turn a blind eye for someone who gives them food. They started markets, especially in these northern border towns, the closer that you were to China, it seems the more you knew about the options that were available, the more into North Korea into the center, the more isolated you were.

But to be honest, you were certain to die if you didn't have some kind of private initiative. And so people began selling anything that they could. The result of this illegal market enterprise is that that caste system, the songbun system we talked about, began to change in an organic kind of way. Women became most of the entrepreneurs as their husband works, their husbands would work in these work units and they didn't get paid much by the government.

But the women had become a little more able to sneak out of their day jobs and start bringing home extra money through their entrepreneurial desires to feed their families. This changed culturally, if not on paper, the traditional view of women, the new economy was really mostly due to women. People began to educate themselves in all kinds of ways to see how they could make a buck.

Actually, prostitution became quite popular as well as abortions. The markets grew and grew largely because goods were being sent in from China due to Deng Xiaoping's economic

reforms. This is in the late 1990s. Market authorities would charge vendors for rent, but they were allowed to sell in the markets.

And before, almost everyone was poor. But now, with this, like, increase of capitalism that was illegal but kind of approved. The divides between the caste systems were growing more and more. The rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. Quote, people who would have been branded economic criminals a decade earlier strutted around in leather shoes and new clothes.

Others were starving even though they were working full time. Inflation was out of control. End of quote. Very poor children wandered around with very little supervision as everyone was working. And life became quite frightening during this time because the lines were blurred. And they did not Well, not always did people know what the criminal code was because it was changing before the famine, North Korea was very orderly and predictable, but then it became very disorderly and frightening because this increase in private enterprise to keep yourself alive, everyone was kind of doing it, but no one knew exactly what the new rules were.

And so public executions began to happen, sometimes for just petty theft. And the labor camps or gulags that I mentioned previously in past episodes were alive and well during this time, and they actually still continue today. They're kept quite secret. We know something of them from a handful of prisoners who have managed to escape.

And most defectors who have spoken to authors or journalists or written books themselves know someone Who disappeared in the middle of the night and was never heard from again. It is said that state agents could show up at your house and take you for interrogation anytime that they wished. And some people were even given appointment times to turn themselves in.

And these interrogations have been reported to be violent. And they, or they would threaten violence. And there were levels to these camps that people were sent to. Some of the camps were called enlightenment centers, designed to kind of rehabilitate the wayward. Mostly for non political prisoners, so people who'd done business.

You'd go to a prison camp if you did business, or if you'd smuggled. Obviously very popular to do that during a famine. The political camps, though, appeared to be the worst. Sentences were for life. Some children were born in the camps. And many whole families were taken away to get rid of the tainted blood we talked about earlier.

There used to be a lot of political prisons, but it does appear that today there are only four. Still too many. Information is difficult to come by about these. Currently to get into one of these camps you have to be related to someone that the state truly hates. You have to deface a Kim statue or do something to make the government afraid that you're going to start an uprising.

Inmates are said to sleep 30 to 40 in a room in dirty shacks and are given starvation level rations. Torture and abuse are very common. The prison guards are said to practice horrific

things on the prisoners. I don't have time to share with you some of the stories from those camps, but in my newsletter I'm going to send out a few resources that I found invaluable in studying them.

Again, fabulous resources. But let's just talk about defectors for a second, because during a famine, there are going to be a lot of people who are going to want to escape. Just because they're hungry and many people defected during the late 1990s. Again, that's not very long ago. There are lots of stories of people defecting.

Everyone's experiences are very different. So there's no way I could cover them all. Some people crossed back and forth between North Korea and China many times before they were caught. And then they were thrown into labor camps in North Korea. They would buy things in China and sell it in North Korea on the black market.

And while they were in China, they would discover that life in China, which really wasn't great by our standards today was way, way better than life in North Korea. One example was a defector who saw a bowl of rice that was set out for a dog to eat in China, and she was so shocked to see an animal eating it since they hadn't seen rice in years.

Sorry, these books are so sad and so moving. Many defectors actually became wives to Chinese men. As I mentioned in episode one, there have been roughly 300,000 people who have defected or escaped North Korea since 1953. Most of them have moved to China or Russia. South Korea has actually accepted some, roughly to the tune of 35,000 defectors.

The fastest way to go is to go through the DMZ, the demilitarized zone, but this is also the most dangerous and difficult way. Those who do that typically are familiar with the area. They're usually in the military. Some go by sea to South Korea, but the far majority escape through the Chinese border in the north and they stay there or they make their way somewhere else like South Korea.

It seems like it's a rough life no matter what. You're not necessarily accepted or comfortable no matter where you go. The Chinese police, for example, aren't super happy about North Korean defectors. It's interesting to hear the different stories and how people learned enough to want to defect. Some that I read were, you know, trained in Pyongyang.

They went to school and there's kind of like a black market of books that would go around about capitalism and they'd read them under their blankets at night so no one could catch them. Others were less educated. And the hostile class or wavering class, but they just hated life there so much that they went to China seeking food and then discovered, wait, the Chinese are living way better than we are.

And then they head down to South Korea to see for themselves what Koreans who spoke their language, you know, was like, and people talk in 2006, 44 percent of defectors that would arrive

in South Korea said that they defected with the help of a family member who had already defected. It is uncommon for North Korean diplomats to defect.

There are several thousand North Korean diplomats. They do live overseas and are considered the most politically trustworthy members of the core class. Members of the SSD or State Security Department. This is basically the police force of North Korea. They go with these diplomats to report on them. And the decision again to defect, is a big one because you know you're leaving your family behind to the mercy of the North Korean police and that they will be considered politically disloyal for life.

In the late 1990s at the height of people defecting, it really was mostly because of hunger and now it's more because they've heard of a better life usually. If people are caught defecting, they are usually sent back to North Korea and they are arrested, tortured, imprisoned, years of hard labor, in some cases, death in a prison camp.

Again, every defector story is different, but from what I learned, it seemed that many had a very difficult time settling into new countries. Some suffered from PTSD, from lack of food. water shortages, lack of access, you know, they had this strong education in this cult of personality and other mental challenges that would come from constant illness, starvation.

Some, though very few, have even returned to North Korea from the shock of it all. And ultimately, I think the separations of families is the most tragic. The stories of mothers leaving to find food and then never being able to get back to their kids. To feed their kids is particularly heartbreaking to me.

Let's pause there. Let's go back for a minute to the government and the leaders of North Korea. We've talked a little bit about normal life. Let's talk about the leaders. Kim Jong il, who is this elusive dear leader, as he was called, he ruled until 2011, so nearly 20 years from when his father died in 1994.

He kind of took power a few years before then. The economy remained in freefall or stagnating for nearly his entire reign, and during his time as leader, there were some economic reforms, such as a particular industrial region called Kaesong. This actually was an industrial region that was open from 2004 to 2016, and it was kind of a collaborative economic development area with South Korea.

It was a park six miles north of the DMZ, and it allowed South Korean companies to use North Koreans as cheap labor, while giving North Korea some foreign currency. And the North Korean workers wages went to the government and were redistributed. However, this did close in 2013 to 2016 when relations between the United States, South Korea, Japan, and North Korea started turning south.

Kim Jong il also grew the military enormously during his time in leadership. There's quite a few stories of actually power going out in the presidential palace. This is when everything was going

dark. And when Kim Jong il asked, Why the power was out. He was told that it was to power the factories and he responded that his palace was to be first priority because power is hard to come by in North Korea.

Even to this day, nuclear power has become a huge thing there. And we're going to talk about North Korean nuclear ambitions in just a second. But it's important to know that nuclear power is extremely important to them. Kim Jong il died in December of 2011, and his, he had three sons, but his youngest son was groomed to be his successor, and his name is Kim Jong un.

He is the current leader of North Korea today. So Kim Jong un. He was born in 1984, so he's very young when he assumed power, about, about 27 years old. Many people call him a millennial despot. Kim Jong un has a lot in common with his father. He clearly wanted to put the military first. And even though he didn't inherit his father's stature, he was not, he's not as small as his dad.

He does seem to have inherited his ego. He was educated in a Swiss boarding school and his identity as the son of the North Korean dear leader was kept under wraps, but it was clear to people that he was wealthy and he came from a very privileged background and he totally embraced it. The technology that we have today and has found ways to bring it into North Korea.

He has a very unique method of keeping the majority of North Korea in the dark while still accessing the internet through smartphones. When he was put in as ruler, he ruthlessly consolidated power. Many people in North Korea. His own half brother included were very skeptical about his ability to lead.

So he led out with swagger In one book, it says right out of the gate Jong un started to poke and prod test and push the boundaries of international tolerance Calculating that he could withstand almost any punishment end of quote Some say that he kind of has an inferiority complex Others think that he just, in Korean culture, respect is a big deal.

He really went after the older men of his father's regime, killing some of them, replacing a lot of them with his own younger men. And in 2013, he executed his uncle, who had been a part of his father's inner circle. And this kind of marked a breaking from Beijing, as well, since this uncle, Was very close with Beijing.

Many people say that these executions happened frequently in his early years. But again, information is really tricky to find here. He does seem to have an open disdain for elderly leadership and is very obsessed with nuclear testing. He has very quickly established himself as a nuclear threat, has overseen a lot of testing.

Since 2011. In 2014, you might remember this, there was a movie called The Interview. It was an action comedy, had the plot of an interview that turns into the assassination plot of Kim Jong

un. This movie offended Kim so much that he hacked the company of Sony. It opened Sony's personal employee information, made it worldwide.

North Korea threatened 9 11 like terrorist attacks if they went ahead and released the film. So clearly he was very nervous what if his people got their hands on this film, what would happen? So Sony decided not to do it. They ended up releasing this film digitally, but it was a huge issue at the time.

I remember it. Well, you can google it if you're interested in it. At the time, Barack Obama, who was president of the United States, said, quote, What? We cannot have a society in which some dictator someplace can start imposing censorship here in the United States. Imagine if producers and distributors and others start engaging in self censorship because they don't want to offend the sensibilities of someone whose sensibilities probably need to be offended.

End of quote. In 2017, Kim Jong nam, who is Kim Jong un's older brother, was approached by two women in a Malaysian airport. Again, the Kim family is allowed to travel, even though their people are not. And these women were told that they were doing an internet prank. They put a VX agent on his face, which is a Schedule 1 weapon of mass destruction, and he died shortly thereafter.

Kim Jong un didn't immediately confess to this crime, but this clearly was his doing. And this says a lot about the character and type of person that Kim Jong un is, and killing his brother in this very public and very distressing way. And it has led to much research showing that North Korea actually has quite a lot of chemical weapons at its disposal.

It's hard to say. Some people think that Kim Jong un is crazy and irrational, Others say he's actually very more measured and, uh, strategic than you might think. I read the whole gambit on, on what people think and I, I really can't tell you what he's like because I'm, very few people really know. One of the reasons to know about North Korea and understand its history and people is that it is a growing nuclear threat.

We have this deeply entrenched cult of personality. We have people who are very isolated decades behind the rest of the world in terms of their standard of living. And then we have a man running the country who is considered quite dangerous. And as I've alluded to in these episodes, the Kim dynasty has been pretty obsessed with nuclear weapons and has been working on developing them since 1959.

In 1959, North Korea and the Soviet Union signed an agreement that the Soviets would provide nuclear training and planned a nuclear facility. which was completed in 1962. So throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union sold nuclear materials to the North Koreans. North Koreans began working on fission experiments, and both China and the Soviet Union wouldn't sell nuclear weapons to the North Koreans, but they would sell materials.

And North Korea even tried to talk with South Korea about it, which makes me laugh because of course South Korea is not going to be interested in working with their enemy who wants to destroy them. and nuclear weapons. But in the 1980s, North Korea starts extracting plutonium from spent nuclear fuel.

And though they did agree in 1985 to make the Korean Peninsula a non nuclear zone through something called the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty, by 1989, so four years later, through satellite images, the U. S. discovered that North Korea did indeed have a nuclear weapons program, despite what they said.

And because they signed this non proliferation treaty, International inspections went into place to see, okay, what's going on here. North Korea would send in reports of how much nuclear material they had, but there were serious doubts about these numbers. And so it started to actually block these inspectors from coming in to check things out and threatened to leave the agreement.

Eventually an agreement was reached that there would be limited inspections if the U. S. called off military exercises nearby in South Korea. Also in the 90s, North Korea launched a missile that opened it up to selling missiles to Iran. And selling nuclear weapons knowledge and materials into Iran in the 1990s and even today is not ideal, uh, in the slightest since Iran, uh, aids terrorist groups and among other things.

So additionally, South Korea and Japan are obviously not too pleased about the idea of nuclear missiles and nuclear weapons in North Korea. This, all of this, mind you, that I've explained so far is during the collapse of the economy. And everything going dark that we've talked about and the famine for a while.

It was essentially a back and forth between North Korea and major world powers like the United States. There were underground nuclear plants that were discovered by satellite. And so inspectors were sent in or North Korea would test a new missile and the U. S. would hike up sanctions against North Korea.

North Korea wanted those sanctions loosened, so they'd agree to halt or pause the progress. And then more evidence was found that they weren't keeping their end of the bargain. The inspectors were kicked out by 2003. They completely backed out of the nonproliferation agreement. And in 2005, the US and North Korea even had an agreement on the table for North Korea to give up its nuclear program, but it was repealed almost immediately.

North Korea continued to test missiles and warheads. The agreements back and forth continued, sometimes even making great progress. with dismantling things on the surface. However, tests continue to be made and the U. S. would pick up on all these tests through satellite or through seismic activity that they would track.



In 2016, North Korea launched a satellite into orbit. It also launched a ballistic missile into the Sea of Japan, and there were more tremors showing that there were nuclear tests being done in underground facilities. I find this very fascinating that the US tracks this stuff through seismic activity because everything's underground.

It's like a toddler hiding from his parent, like when my son says he doesn't have any chocolate but his lips are covered in chocolate, I just can't get over it. We're not going to have nuclear weapons, but we're going to go underground so you can't tell. And then, you You're going to have to find out through seismic activity.

Like there's earthquakes every time we test. Also in 2016, when Trump became president in the United States, it was uncovered that the Obama administration had been doing a cyber attack program against North Korea's missile development. Also during the Trump administration, back and forth it goes again.

North Korea launched a missile. South Korea and the US fired missiles the same day. It also launched a missile over Japan. And in 2017, North Korea tested a nuclear device that was said to be eight times the size of the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. All of these tests appear to be a sign of force, but nothing has happened yet with it.

At the essence of it, we've come somewhere close to North Korea, nuclear war with North Korea quite a few times. And it really has been a back and forth and back and forth game in terms of negotiations. And it seems that they're still testing things all the time. As of this day, June 2022, North Korea is still launching missiles off the coast of the Korean peninsula.

South Korea is still responding in kind. It's kind of like a force showdown. You can Google it right now and see recent stories about it. There are legitimate threats to South Korea and Japan who are allies with North Korea. The United States and other UN nations. So much of North Korea's propaganda is to create fear of the United States, even to this day.

If something were to go down, I think it would be an international crisis. The recently elected president of South Korea is showing more of a tough stance on North Korea than the past president of South Korea. It's trying to beef up its military. In 2018, Kim said that North Korea was, quote, a peace loving nuclear power, will not use a nuclear weapon as long as the aggressive, hostile forces do not infringe upon our country's sovereignty and interests and will not threaten any country or region with nuclear weapons.

However, we will resolutely respond to any act of destroying peace and security on the Korean peninsula. End of quote. So it's four years ago. Kim has been very clear that the nuclear button is on his desk. Also during this time, it is said that North Korea is developing more cyber attacking capabilities and working with China in that front as well.

So they're very capable. The people who are allowed to have internet seem to be quite capable in terms of their capabilities with cyber attacks. Life in North Korea now and in the future is

something that's hard to predict because we're only allowed to see what we're allowed to see. There is a website called Freedom House that ranks countries on a freedom scale and North Korea is a 3 out of 100 in terms of freedom.

For political freedoms they rank 0 out of 40, and on civil liberties, they are ranked 3 out of 60. Their assessment is this, quote, North Korea is a one party state led by a dynastic totalitarian dictatorship, surveillance is pervasive, arbitrary arrests and detention are common, and punishments for political offenses are severe.

The state maintains a system of camps for political prisoners where torture, forced labor, starvation, and other atrocities take place. While some social and economic changes have been observed in recent years, including a growth in small scale private business activity, human rights violations are still widespread, grave, and systematic.

End of quote. So this is accurate for today. Daily life looks different now than it did during the famine. My take from reading quite a bit on it is that the famine kind of forced the people of North Korea to fend for themselves with private enterprise on the side and this has continued. It doesn't sound like life is easy there for the vast majority of people.

It seems like free time, extra income are not in high supply and they are still required to attend self criticisms and neighborhood meetings like we talked about. on a regular basis. And again, political prisoners, these camps, are still in existence. It does appear that they have some internet, mainly limited to the core class, and it is estimated that some, by some, that at least half of North Koreans have seen a South Korean TV drama or they have listened to South Korean pop music illegally.

The state does everything it can to make all the media. What the state gives them, though. The closer you are to the Chinese border, the more illegal things get. Apparently, some women wear skinny jeans, even though it's illegal. And DVDs of South Korean dramas are sold illegally. One source called North Korea Confidential, published in 2015, talks about how North Korea actually is quite a dynamic place nowadays.

The average North Korean makes a living from private trade, because people have official jobs in these state owned factories, but on the side, they run their own businesses. And the core songbun, those who are supposed to be closest to the state are said to be more money hungry and live relatively average lives compared to the lower songbun.

So it seems to me that nowadays the idea of a totally brainwashed society worshiping a leader might be too simplistic. There's much more going on there that we don't know because journalists can't exactly walk around and ask questions. People in Pyongyang, what their opinions are. So we have to rely on elite members of the Pyongyang society, society, defectors, diplomats, nonprofit workers, some of the traders who trade across China.

That's what we have to rely on for information. The North Korean government does still put out images of festivals for Kim Jong Un's birthday and the like. We see images of people worshipping at massive statues of the two past Kims. It seems like the cult of personality is very entrenched. solidly established, and it still, it controls all aspects of society.

The image to the outside is that Kim Jong un runs it all. Some things say there's some speculation about this. Some of his family members, including his sister, might be involved. And some compare the government to a criminal syndicate or like a mafia, because the state trading companies will work with anyone who will do business with them.

My take is that Kim It seems very corrupt. Food shortages don't seem to appear to be the highest issue anymore, though it's still an issue. Like I said earlier, some experts say that you can get anything in North Korea if you have enough money to pay for it. However, modern North Korea does have theme parks.

The elites get to enjoy a lot more of the pleasures of 21st century life. And it's a bit of a balancing act for them. Some analysts compare it to life in the late Soviet Union, and they think that with these elites getting more privileges and understanding of what's outside, that this could breed discontent as people get more materialistic.

It's hard to say because this regime has definitely lasted longer than anyone could have ever thought it would last. You know, Stalin picked Kim Il sung, never imagining, I imagine, that North Korea would outlive the Soviet Union. And I mean, If I knew that there were so much wealth outside of my country, I would be interested in it.

But watching something on tv and reading it in a book are very different from seeing it yourself and most of the people alive in North Korea today don't remember life before 1950. How much do they know? Honestly, I would love to speak to a North Korean and ask them their perspective on this. I do think it's pretty obvious that there have been Many talks for years about what to do with North Korea.

Here we have a country with nuclear weapons, human rights abuses, a military threat, especially to South Korea. And in one book, which was written by the former director to Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, he says that unifying the peninsula has been discussed in the case of the regime collapses, which could happen.

For many years, South Koreans Really didn't want to talk about it, but it does seem that since Kim Jong un rose to power, the topic of unifying the peninsula has come up more often, has been discussed at conferences and the like. This could possibly mean war or a major conflict or the regime collapsing in some way.

It does pose some serious challenges though to reunite a peninsula. Tens of thousands of refugees would probably go to China. Nuclear weapons would be on the loose, not to mention the amount of work it would be to change the mindset and help With the immediate needs of the

North Koreans, as he put it quote, in reality, it will likely fall somewhere in the middle of being a soft landing or hard landing, not so hard as to cause mass calamity on the peninsula and in the region, but not so soft as to make reunifying Korea and rebuilding the North a simple, straightforward task.

End of quote. Obviously, that's a very complicated topic for unifying Korea, but it does seem to be a topic that people discuss. This man, I've been quoting, Victor Cha, he published a book in 2012 where he says that he thinks North Korea is unlikely to last much longer. It has been 10 years since that was published, and almost all negotiations have stalled out in that time period.

What makes North Korea so different from other countries that have had some kind of collapse is that it's, it's not, uh, a developing country to some degree. This is a country that was once rather industrialized and then regressed. Today it is more developed and modern in terms of its economy than, say, Somalia or Ethiopia.

It has this strong central state, high state capacities, and the ability to reach its arms into the smallest communities. As one historian put it, quote, serious reform could happen in North Korea. Once the key decisions were taken, because this is a country that can mobilize everyone for centrally determined tasks with its well educated and disciplined workforce, North Korea could effectively exploit a comparative advantage in labor costs in world markets, end of quote.

So the main issue in North Korea is Kim Jong un and his inner circle. And this year, 2022, there have been stalemates from South Korea. alluding to attacking the North, which the North has responded to with stalemates of using nuclear or statements, excuse me, not stalemates, of using nuclear weapons. North Korea has also alluded to taking over South Korea from time to time.

North Korea's closest ally is still China. They have a mutual aid and cooperation treaty. Right now, that means that if one country is in need, the other will come to its defense. With North Korea doing nuclear tests, This is something to be aware of, especially with China's rise to becoming quite possibly the world's biggest superpower.

As for Russia, currently with the war in Ukraine, Russia is becoming more isolated due to international sanctions. And since North Korea hates the United States and has been quite public about that, some sources are saying that Putin and Kim Jong Un are developing stronger ties. And that's where we're going to end.

I'm going to stop there. Okay. So in this episode, we learned. Let's go through a summary list. We first learned that Kim Jong il, this is the second leader, was a secretive private man, obsessed with film, lived very high on the hog while the country starved. The famine of the 1990s was so horrific that illegal markets started to crop up in North Korea for people to survive.

This changed the situation in North Korea from being very predictable to being more fear based. Kim Jong un rose to power in 2011. He rules North Korea today. He's very aggressive, has

acted out in Quite violent ways throughout his time in power and in the last 10 years, the amount of nuclear weapons testing coming out of North Korea has led to pretty widespread concern, especially South Korea and Japan and in the United States.

Life in North Korea today still seems largely isolated from the world. It's ranked very low on the freedom scale, though it does seem to have more to more going on than just being completely isolated with this religious personality cults. All right, my takeaways. From studying North Korea on the whole is to be grateful for freedom.

I think it's good to notice what isn't working or needs to be improved in one's country, but I also think that has to be countered with gratitude for what we do have. I have started noticing abundance everywhere. The other day I saw on Instagram a woman cutting four bell peppers, and I just finished reading about people mashing up weeds to make their watered soups.

edible while I had been a child and I honestly wanted to like shout watching her cut these four peppers so nonchalantly. Do you know how lucky we are to have four bell peppers? We have so much abundance. And I also was in the airport not that long ago and I turned to my husband and said just like stop and look around at all these people's shoes.

Everyone's shoes were so nice, like they had good shoes, they worked, and you knew that they had more shoes at home. And I just stopped and felt gratitude in that moment for all of this abundance around me. I also have started noticing I'm feeling more grateful to vote, to be able to speak out anytime I want, to not feel concerned that a government official is going to knock on my door and take me away.

I feel grateful that my neighbors don't snitch on me, that I'm not being asked to snitch on them. And on another note, I think that labor camps are something. that are still going on today and that we need to know about. They're happening throughout the world. We study World War II and the Holocaust, but how aware are we of humans that are today running concentration camps?

And how do we get to that point? I think personally that we get there by othering. We get there by slogans that are not nuanced and are used to other other people. There's us against them. And I think that it's one of the most dangerous things in the world to other. people. As my friend Rachel put it, every communist regime has done this in the guise of taking down the powerful rich people.

But ultimately, they have just harmed everyone. And I personally believe that. So we've come to the end of North Korea 101. I hope you learned a thing or two. If you did, would you please share the podcast with a few friends and family members or leave a review on your favorite podcasting app? I'd really appreciate it.

I truly believe the more we know about the world, the smarter we are about understanding current events. And relating to each other, and discovering our shared humanity, and just becoming more well rounded people. So let's go out and make the world a little wiser.