

The Untold Story: Famine in North Korea Markets Aid And Reform

North Korea, an isolated country known for its regime and secretive nature, has been plagued by several famines in its history. One of the most devastating famines occurred in the 1990s, leading to the deaths of millions of people. This article aims to shed light on the issue, exploring the impact of markets, aid, and reforms in combating famine in North Korea.

Understanding the 1990s Famine in North Korea

The 1990s famine, also known as the "Arduous March," was a culmination of several factors including natural disasters, economic mismanagement, and isolationist policies. It resulted in widespread food shortages, malnutrition, and starvation among the North Korean population. The scale of the famine remains a subject of debate, as the secretive nature of the North Korean regime makes obtaining accurate data a challenging task.

The Emergence of Markets

One unexpected outcome of the famine was the emergence of private markets, known as "jangmadang," which played a crucial role in addressing food shortages. Initially, these markets were unofficial and illegal but were tolerated due to the inability of the government to provide for its people's basic needs. These markets offered a lifeline for ordinary North Koreans, allowing them to purchase essential goods and trade in a rudimentary market economy.

Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform

by Stephan Haggard(Kindle Edition)

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Screen Reader : Supported
Enhanced typesetting : Enabled
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Print length : 311 pages



Influence of International Aid

The international community stepped in to provide assistance during the famine, sending food aid to North Korea. While this aid did provide temporary relief, it also raised concerns about its distribution and diversion by the North Korean government. Reports of aid being redirected to the military or the elites instead of reaching the most vulnerable raised questions about its effectiveness.

Nevertheless, international aid played a vital role in alleviating the immediate suffering caused by the famine.

Reforms for Resilience

In recent years, there have been signs of limited reforms within North Korea's economy. These reforms have allowed for some decentralization and an increase in market-oriented activities. While the regime remains cautious about the influence of markets, acknowledging their role in combating food shortages has prompted a limited acceptance of certain economic changes. However, the extent to which these reforms reach the general population and alleviate long-term issues remains uncertain.

The Road Ahead

North Korea's famine in the 1990s has left a lasting impact on the country and its people. The emergence of markets, influenced by international aid and limited reforms, has provided a glimpse of hope for addressing food shortages. However, the underlying issues of state control, isolationism, and economic mismanagement persist. The road ahead for North Korea involves a delicate balance between maintaining its regime's control while embracing necessary reforms to ensure the well-being of its citizens.

The famine in North Korea during the 1990s was a devastating event that claimed the lives of millions. The emergence of markets, international aid, and limited reforms have played significant roles in addressing food shortages. However, the situation remains complex, with the underlying issues still needing substantial attention. By shedding light on this untold story, it is hoped that further discussions and actions will be taken to alleviate the suffering and move towards building a more resilient North Korea.



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In the mid-1990s, as many as one million North Koreans died in one of the worst famines of the twentieth century. The socialist food distribution system collapsed

primarily because of a misguided push for self-reliance, but was compounded by the regime's failure to formulate a quick response-including the blocking of desperately needed humanitarian relief.

As households, enterprises, local party organs, and military units tried to cope with the economic collapse, a grassroots process of marketization took root. However, rather than embracing these changes, the North Korean regime opted for tentative economic reforms with ambiguous benefits and a self-destructive foreign policy. As a result, a chronic food shortage continues to plague North Korea today.

In their carefully researched book, Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland present the most comprehensive and penetrating account of the famine to date, examining not only the origins and aftermath of the crisis but also the regime's response to outside aid and the effect of its current policies on the country's economic future. Their study begins by considering the root causes of the famine, weighing the effects of the decline in the availability of food against its poor distribution. Then it takes a close look at the aid effort, addressing the difficulty of monitoring assistance within the country, and concludes with an analysis of current economic reforms and strategies of engagement.

North Korea's famine exemplified the depredations that can arise from tyrannical rule and the dilemmas such regimes pose for the humanitarian community, as well as the obstacles inherent in achieving economic and political reform. To reveal the state's culpability in this tragic event is a vital project of historical recovery, one that is especially critical in light of our current engagement with the "North Korean question."



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