

# Will Ukraine become a route for North Korean defection to South?

By Lev Tsitrin

I read that North Korea – having been created in Stalin’s time – was built as a carbon copy of Stalin’s Soviet Union, its citizens being but slaves of the state, and the state being impersonated by infallible great leader. To Soviets, Comrade Stalin was “the greatest genius of all times and all peoples,” and Mr. Kim likely wields similar status in his domains – an all-wise, all-seeing, all-powerful incarnation of humanity’s progress, entitled to absolute rule by sheer virtue of “historic inevitability” – a Soviet catchphrase that even in my time was a routine part of the propaganda vocabulary.



This picture taken on October 2, 2024 and released from North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) via KNS on October 4, 2024 shows North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un © posing with troops during an inspection at a training base of the Korean People's Army's special operations forces in the western region, at an undisclosed location in North Korea (KCNA VIA KNS/AFP via Getty Image)

I assume that if the two regimes are similar in their general purpose, they will be similar in their particulars, too, since, as is well known, form imitates function. Consider control of population: in the Soviet Union, you could not simply pack and leave for another city on a whim – your address was stamped in your passport, and that's where you had to live. Particular care was taken of control of the border. Everyone in the West heard of the Berlin wall – but its equivalent was built along the entire ten-thousand-mile (or so) perimeter of the Soviet Union.

In the school, we read stories of heroic Soviet border guards catching enemy spies who try to get through, and sabotage the great progress that the Soviet people made towards building Communism – the workers' paradise on earth for which the international proletariat pines, too, though their attempted revolutions constantly suppressed by the enemies of historical progress – the reactionary capitalists who hope to extinguish the guiding bright light of glorious Communist future in the Soviet Union, too.

That was the official line, taught in schools and on TV. The unofficial, popular interpretation was that, just as the Berlin wall, the border was tightly controlled not to keep the enemy out, but to pen the citizenry in – with the result that the only risk of defections came from the privileged “nomenclatura” – those allowed to travel abroad: diplomats and members of the elite in the arts, culture, science, and sports. plus the thoroughly vetted members of group tours, many measures being taken to minimize their risk of defection (as well-illustrated in *“Moscow on the Hudson.”*)

Undoubtedly, the borders of North Korea are just as well secured – which is why every act of defection to South Korea requires great bravery and a lot of luck – and the rare successes are made into news items in the West. The circuitous route through third countries is probably just as hard as it was for the Soviets, since only the regime insiders are

allowed out, and their loyalty is buttressed by many privileges, and insured by not allowing relatives out of the country at the same time, using them as hostages,

However, Mr. Kim's sale of twelve thousand privates to Mr. Putin for use as cannon fodder in Ukraine presents an interesting exception – and a natural question arises: would North Korean conscripts use it to surrender to Ukrainians, so as to defect to South Korea?

I doubt that North Korean POWs would wish to return to the North anyways – if Stalin's policy towards Soviet POWs in WW2 is any guide: Stalin treated surrender as treason, and Soviets taken by the Germans were sent to gulag, or worse. I wonder whether Mr. Kim's opinion is any different. And how about deliberate surrender to Ukrainian troops – surrender on the condition that they will be sent to South Korea, surrender for the sake of defection? Is the indoctrination so strong as to make the very thought of it impossible? Is the military discipline so strict that one cannot hope to slip away in the heat of battle?

I do not know – but it will be interesting to see what transpires. Many decades ago, when I was a small Soviet kid, an uncle told me that he had a chance to defect to the Americans at the end of WW2 when he was stationed with the Soviet contingent in Budapest or Vienna – I don't remember which (and he was strongly encouraged to do so by some American GI's who – as he explained to me when I expressed amazement that he managed to communicate with them even though he knew not a word of English, "spoke the very same Yiddish as us") – but did not take the offer. I wonder whether the young North Koreans forced to fight and die for Putin feel differently – and whether they have in them any independence of thought still untouched by propaganda that is a key to taking this golden opportunity?