

Koryo Saram, or Koreans of the Former Soviet Union: In the Past and Present

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There are roughly 500,000 Koreans who live in the former Soviet Union. About two-thirds live in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and the remaining third mostly in Russia. A small number of Koreans also live in Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Turkmenistan, Belarus, and elsewhere.¹ This widespread dispersal of the population resulted from the repression of the Stalinist era and subsequent migration within the Soviet Union.

Both in academic literature and the vernacular, the term "Soviet Koreans" was commonly used to refer to all Koreans living in the "unified and everlasting Union." During this period, the population referred to themselves as either "*Koryo Saram*" or "*Choson Saram*" interchangeably, but in the last ten years, both at home and abroad, the term "*Koryo Saram*" has become the preferred term.

The Soviet Koreans are not homogeneous in composition but can be divided into three distinct groups. The most numerous are the descendants of the Korean settlers in the Russian Far East—largely from Hamgyongbukdo, in the northern part of Korea. This group is now in the second to fifth generation abroad. The term *Koryo Saram* refers to this group in particular.² The second largest group is the "Sakhalin Koreans," who are descendants of the roughly 60,000 Koreans who were sent as forced laborers by the Japanese colonial administration from the southern part of the

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Korean peninsula to the southern part of Sakhalin Island. Today, the Sakhalin Koreans number about 35,000 people, and they range from first to third generation.³ The third group of Soviet Koreans are former citizens of the DPRK who came to the Soviet Union for university studies or contract work and did not return home. Although small in number, this group is easily distinguished because they speak Korean as their mother tongue. Thus, the term "Soviet Koreans" is much more general than the term *Koryo Saram*, despite being often incorrectly used as a synonym.

Because of intensive research by scholars, both domestic and foreign, the history and contemporary lifestyle of the *Koryo Saram* is no longer a tabula rasa.⁴

The immigration of the *Koryo Saram* began in the late 1860s and continued in several waves through the mid-1920s. Famine, natural disasters, exploitation, lack of land ownership, and later repression from the Japanese occupation of Korea pushed many people to emigrate from Korea to Russia. Other pull factors included geographical proximity, tolerance of Russian authorities to Korean immigration, availability of farmland, and the opportunity for starting anew. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Koreans had settled not only in the rural areas of Primorskiy Kray, the shore area of the Russian Far East (hereafter the Maritime Province), but also in the cities of the Far East and Siberia. In the first decades of Korean immigration, Koreans lived in separate villages. Their daily life, social relations, ethnic culture, and language were exactly the same as in Korea. The October Revolution of 1917 united workers of all ethnic groups under its slogans of justice, freedom, and equal rights for all workers. Koreans largely supported the Soviet cause and hundreds sacrificed their lives in the war with Japan, believing this would also help lead to the liberation of Korea.⁵

By the 1930s, the Koreans of the Soviet Far East had established their own identity, culture and traditions. Dozens of Korean agricultural and fishing *kolkhozes* were founded. Koreans were actively involved in government and social organizations. Traditional culture flourished; the Korean intelligentsia prospered; and Korean radio, theater, educational and cultural institutions were established. Hundreds of young Koreans were educated in the universities of Moscow, Leningrad, and other large Russian cities. Koreans were Sovietized and integrated into the new political and socioeconomic system.⁶

The Koreans of the Far East were the first people of the Soviet

Union to be deported. The same fate was shared subsequently by dozens of other populations. It is wrong to think that Stalin decided to single out Koreans for deportation. On the basis of order number 1428-326cc of the Soviet government and Communist Party, dated August 21, 1937, the deportation of the Korean population of the Far East, signed by Molotov and Stalin, was a logical continuation of earlier Czarist and Soviet policy relating to national minority populations.⁷ About 100,000 Koreans were resettled in Kazakhstan, mostly on new Korean *kolkhozes*; others were distributed to pre-existing ones. It was in Kazakhstan that the Korean theatre, the Korean newspaper *Senbong*, a Korean pedagogical institute and college, and deposits of Korean-language books were relocated, making Kazakhstan the center of Korean intellectual life in the Soviet Union. About 74,000 deportees were sent to Uzbekistan, evenly divided between new Korean *kolkhozes* and pre-existing Uzbek *kolkhozes*.⁸ The Koreans settled in this new place, established the basis for a new life, and contributed to the development of agriculture in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. More than one hundred Koreans received the highest honor of the Soviet Union, the gold star as Heroes of Socialist Labor.⁹

The turning point in the life of the Koreans, as all other Soviet peoples, was in 1953, with the death of Stalin, and the beginning of the liberalization of the political regime. With this, the Koreans began to reestablish their ethnic identity, culture, language and civil rights. In 1957-1958, Koreans began to petition the party and government for their national rehabilitation. The government could not ignore such an organized campaign and began to "strengthen cultural-educational work among the Korean population," in order to give the appearance of addressing the people's concerns. Because of their education, hard work, and organizational skills, the Koreans joined the ranks of the leaders of industry, government, and educational institutions. By the 1970s, the number of graduates of universities was about twice that of the general population. Koreans were elected to the parliaments of the Soviet Union and the Central Asian republics, were given ministerial posts in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and were also found among the generals of the Soviet army. Today, hundreds of Koreans in Central Asia and Russia have received Ph.D. degrees and work as professors and researchers in universities, institutes, and scientific centers.

The political and socioeconomic changes, and the deteriorating standard of living of the last decade in Russia and the newly

independent states of Central Asia, has led to much trepidation among all peoples of the former Soviet empire about their future. In the Soviet times, the standard of living of all people was roughly the same, whereas today, there is an ever-increasing socioeconomic divide with a small number of very rich people and the majority of the population with little income and many difficulties coping with their daily needs and problems.¹⁰

The *Koryo Saram* share the same difficulties as all other people in the former Soviet Union, along with additional problems unique to them. These issues can be expressed as a set of conflicting dualities: the first duality is the problem of international intraethnic solidarity among Koreans of the newly independent states and the problem of interethnic integration in the new political and socioeconomic life. The second duality is ethnic revival and ethnic survival for members of an ethnic group with no autonomy and geographic dispersion throughout the population.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, there has been substantial divergence in political and socioeconomic structures among the newly independent states. Such nuclearization has led to substantial divergence among the lives and lifestyles of the *Koryo Saram* in those states as well. The main question for the future is how different the Koreans in each of these states will become. At present they are still more similar than different. But what happens in the future—when each state establishes its own national language and culture in everyday life—is an open question. Given that 70 percent of the Koreans of the former Soviet Union live in Central Asia, where great similarities exist among the dominant Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek populations, there is the possibility that greater unity among the *Koryo Saram* of these countries might be maintained as well. However, three conditions are necessary to establish and maintain such a regional community of *Koryo Saram*: (1) A strong desire for national consolidation and unity among this dispersed population of the Korean diaspora; (2) Consolidation of actions of the Korean associations and societies of the different countries; (3) Formal agreements among the governments of the Central Asian Republics concerning the coordination of the society of *Koryo Saram* in their respective countries. To this day, none of the aforementioned conditions have been met. Furthermore, even within individual countries or cities there is substantial division among competing groups of Koreans with different leaders, but similar platforms. Thus, competition rather than cooperation prevails, especially in Tashkent and Moscow,

though in Almaty there is more consolidation and unity within the Korean community.

The problem of interethnic integration is to maintain a balanced representation across all areas of socioeconomic life in a multiethnic environment, as was the case in the Soviet era. In the past there was a strong Korean presence in various academic disciplines, in local government, in the arts and sciences, and cultural life. Today, however, there is a tendency for the young Koreans to disproportionately move into small entrepreneurship, leaving few interested in pursuing careers in academics, government, or cultural pursuits in the newly independent states. In the past there were many Korean professors in various disciplines. Today there are fewer Koreans interested in such economically disadvantaged careers, due largely to striving for success among the Korean population.

The Korean community must integrate into a very new socioeconomic and political landscape. The newly independent states have dominant populations of Turkic-speaking Moslem populations, which also had their culture and lifestyle suppressed during the Soviet eras. These populations are now experiencing a cultural and religious revival, accompanied by a reinstatement of their national language and religious customs in everyday life of their republics. Furthermore, the Russian population is largely repatriating to Russia, and the Russian-speaking minority populations like Germans, Greeks, and Jews are repatriating to Germany, Greece, and Israel at high rates. The birth rate among Koreans and other Russian-speaking minority populations is decreasing, while that of Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Uzbek peoples are increasing, especially in rural areas, leading to massive demographic changes in the not-too-distant future. All of these conditions will lead to difficulties for the *Koryo Saram* to integrate, as they are largely a Russian-speaking non-Islamic population.

The problem of national revival is complicated because it is a topic no one has discussed in academic, social, or political circles. To most people ethnic revival means wearing traditional clothing, eating Korean food, or learning the language, but there is more to it than that. It is not simply a matter of copying South Korean culture in a Central Asian context. The *Koryo Saram* have a cultural tradition that has substantially diverged from that of South Korea. Over the past decades, the *Koryo Saram* have lived together with peoples of various backgrounds and cultures, including Russians, Europeans, and Central Asians. These cultures are dra-

matically different from traditional Korean society, and the *Koryo Saram* have substantially integrated and acculturated, incorporating many aspects of these cultures into their own. For example, their native language is Russian. For these reasons it is not trivial to define what cultural revival means, let alone to manage to get Korean organizations or local governments to act on it. South Koreans very often try to impose their culture on *Koryo Saram* as if that is the meaning of cultural revival, but this is not reasonable or correct because of the enormity of different experiences the two divergent populations have undergone in the last century.¹¹

Lastly, for the *Koryo Saram*, who have no nation-state or local autonomy in either Russia or the newly independent Central Asian states, there is the problem of survival as a unique ethnos. At this time, roughly 85 percent of Koreans in Kazakhstan live in cities, compared to 43 percent of the general population. In Central Asia urban life is more ethnically integrated, leading to an ever-increasing tendency for Koreans to marry non-Koreans, with the intermarriage rate over 40 percent at the present time.¹² The problem of the lack of cultural cohesion among Koreans in Central Asia is exacerbated by the increasing tendency to genetic integration as well. Many young Koreans of mixed parentage may be classified as Korean in their passports but do not have strong cultural or biological ties to *Koryo Saram* as a group. The survival of *Koryo Saram* as a distinct national group is dependent on cultural cohesion as well as on biological ties, and at present there is a danger of losing both.

Some years ago substantial discussion took place around the potential of setting up an autonomous Korean area in the Russian Far East. To this end, several young Koreans from Central Asia went to the Russian Far East to explore the possibility of moving entire family units systematically back to the Maritime Province. Such a mass migration would receive no help or financial backing from the Russian government or local authorities.¹³ The Koreans concluded that such settlement would be impractical because there is no procedure for establishment of such autonomy in Russian law. Moreover, the Volga Germans had already failed in their attempt to reassert local autonomy within an autonomous republic.

Today's *Koryo Saram* will ultimately have to learn to respect the history and culture of the titular ethnic groups in the countries where they live, learn the local languages, and once again adapt themselves to changing conditions. For their future, the *Koryo*

Saram must integrate into socioeconomic and political life in these newly independent states.

Notes

1. In 1999, the first national census of Kazakhstan was held, and in the other CIS countries, this will happen in the near future.
2. Kim Syn Khwa, *Ocherk po istorii sovetskikh koreitsev* (Alma-Ata, 1965; Pak B.D. *Koreitsy v rossiskoi imperii*, Moscow, 1993).
3. Bok Zi Kou, *Sakhalinskiye koreitsy: problemy i perspektivy* (Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, 1989); Kuzin A.T. *Dalnevostochnye, koreitsy: zhizn' i tragediya sud'by* (Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, 1993).
4. Kim G.N., *Koryo saram. Bibliografiya i istoriografiya* (Almaty: Kazakh University Press, 2000).
5. Babichev I., *Uchastiye kitaiskikh i koreiskikh trudyaschikhsya v grazhdanskoj voine na Dalnem Vostoke* (Tashkent, 1959); Kim M., *Koreiskie internatsionalisty v bor'be za vlast' Sovetov na Dalnem Vostoke, 1918-1922* (Moscow, 1979); Pak Hwan, *A History of Nationalist Movements among Koreans Residing in Russia* (Seoul, 1995).
6. Pak B.D., *Koreitsy v Sovetskoi Rossii* (Moscow-Irkutsk, 1995).
7. German N. Kim and Ross King, "The Koryo Saram: Koreans in the Former USSR," *Korean and Korean American Studies Bulletin* 12:2&3 (2001), 19-45.
8. Kan G.V., *Istoriya koreitsev Kazakhstana* (Almaty, 1995); Kim P.G., *Koreitsy Respubliki Uzbekistan* (Tashkent, 1993); Chon Kyongsu, *Chungbu Asea koryoin sahwe ui yokchong kwa chillo-chegukchui y yoksa wa sinsosu minjok* (Seoul: Haewe Minjok yonguso, 1996).
9. Kho, Songmoo, *Koreans in Soviet Central Asia*, *Studia Orientalia* 61 (Helsinki, 1987).
10. Materials of sociological investigations among Koreans of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan can be found in the following books: Kan G.V., *Koreitsy v Steptom kraye* (Almaty, 2001); Kwon Hwi Young, Han Valery, Ban Byong Yul, *Uchekhistan hanin'yi jongchasong yongu* (Seoul: Hanguk Jengsin munhwa yenguwon, 2001).
11. Kim G.N., Khan V.S., *Aktual'nye problemy i perspektivy koreiskoi diaspory Tsentral'noi Azii—Izvestiya koreyevedeniya Kazakhstana* (Almaty, Vypusk 6, 1999), 27-40; Natsuko Oka, "The Korean Diaspora in Nationalizing Kazakhstan: Strategies for Survival as an Ethnic Minority" in German N. Kim and Ross King, eds., "The Koryo Saram: Koreans in the Former USSR," *Korean and Korean American Studies Bulletin* 12:2&3 (2001), 89-114.
12. Yem N.B., *K probleme natsional'no-smeschannykh brakov. Izvestiya koreyevedeniya Kazakhstana* (Almaty, Vypusk 26, 1997), 40-51.
13. Bugai N., *Rossiyskiye Koreitsy: novyi povorot istorii. 90-ye gody* (Moscow, 2000).