



Kopë-saram

# A brief introduction to CIS<sup>1</sup> Koreans

This article is adapted from my bachelor's thesis which was published in 2016 and has been integrated with information I have gathered in the past years regarding the Korean diaspora from Central Asia. It is in no way meant to be an exhaustive account of this specific group, but it is meant to introduce it as a developing diaspora especially in the context of return migration to South Korea and the concept of “legacy migration” as intended by Ji-Yeon O. Jo, whose book *Homing: An Affective Topography of Ethnic Korean Return Migration* (2018) I am currently reviewing.

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## Introduction

At the beginning of the 2010 decade, the number of Koreans residing outside Korea constituted more than 7 million, and the most numerous groups lived in China (2 million); the USA (about 2.5 million); Japan (0.8 million). Former USSR received 0.55 million Korean migrants of which two-thirds reside in Central Asia, primarily in Uzbekistan (180,000 people), Kazakhstan (100,000 people) and Kyrgyzstan (30,000 people). They arrived in these areas after an organised deportation occurred in 1937 under Stalin, as part of the purges from the Russian Far East to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>2</sup> Internal migration between Central Asian countries and from there to

Russia boomed after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. At this point, due to the unstable situation, Koryo Saram faced yet another disruption in their circumstances and found themselves subjected to various ethnic policies that favoured the majority ethnic groups and impaired the social mobility of the minority ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup>

## Who are the Koreans in Central Asia?

The history of Korean migration to the Russian Far East coincided with that of Russia's colonial ambitions in this area. With the conclusion of the Treaties of Aigun in 1858 and Peking

[1] Commonwealth Independent States

[2] Kim, G. (2012). Ethnicity, Identity, and Attitude to Religions of the Central Asian Koreans: Some results of a Pilot Survey among Korean Minority Students, *The Journal of Northeast Asian History*, 9(1): 67-90

[3] Jo, Ji-Yeon O. (2018). *Homing: An affective topography of Korean Ethnic Migration*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press

in 1860 with China, the land east of the Ussuri River were formally added to Russia. This territory extended between the Ussuri and Amur Rivers and the Pacific Ocean and included the Maritime Province. The Russian government recognised a need for colonisation of the region and relocated the Cossacks between 1859 and 1860, but it was not until the first wave of Korean migrants that the area saw flourishing and economic growth.<sup>4</sup>

Historians have traditionally divided the history of the Korean diaspora in Russia and Central Asia in two main periods, namely pre-deportation (1860s-1937) and post-deportation (1937-present). However, due to the significance of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent geopolitical shifts in the region, a third period covering the post-Soviet era (1991-present) can also be added.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to summarise the long and complex history of the Korean diaspora in Central Asia, but for the sake of simplicity we can keep in mind that the first settlements in the Russian Far East

were welcomed and supported by the Russian government that had started an operation to populate the area but lacked skilled residents to care for the soil. Between 1905 and 1922 the influx of Koreans to the Far East intensified as many found an escape route from the Japanese empire. Here the Korean independence movement started organising and after the defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War, found its end as a measure to keep the peace in the area. From this moment on, Koreans in the Maritime Province were mistrusted, even after the new policy had granted them citizenship in Russia. This is the context in which, in 1937, after fears of espionage in the area, Stalin ordered the forced relocation of 36,442 Korean families to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>6</sup> Historical reports and later-generation Koreans' accounts talk about the period of transport as having lasted between thirty and forty days in unsanitary conditions and during the harshest months of the winter.

[4] Kim, G. (2017). Migration vs. Repatriation to South Korea in the Past and Present, *Journal of Contemporary Korean Studies*, 4(1): 35-62

[5] Yoon, I.J. (2000). Forced Relocation, Language Use, and Ethnic Identity of Koreans in Central Asia, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 9(1): 35-64

[6] Jo, 2018



It is difficult to say how many lost their lives in this time but those who survived, did so in part also due to the kindness of Kazakhstani and Uzbekistani locals who offered food and shelter to the dispersed. At the same time, around forty thousand were deported from the Maritime Province to Sakhalin and exploited

for labour. From this moment on, Koreans in Central Asia and in Sakhalin had to start from scratch in hostile conditions and, more often than not, unable to contact family members who were sent to a different area in an attempt to disperse assumed espionage networks.<sup>7</sup> This is the environment in which Koreans



in Russia and Central Asia had to re-create their identity while also resiliently maintaining the connection to their traditions and language.

Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of openness coupled with political reformation led to the dismantling of the Soviet Union. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was born out of this disbanding, but this caused a new wave of destabilisation for Koreans in the area. Such changes also brought new discrimination towards ethnic minorities, in practice deteriorating their social

and economic circumstances. This is the context in which the diasporans from the CIS started migrating to South Korea and other countries, Russia included.

## Identity, language and migration to South Korea

Identity today is a matter of collective empowerment that is based on and constructed from history, geography, biology, collective memory and religious affiliation. The identity of an ethnic minority



group shows a tendency of a deeper connection among members who faced common experiences of discrimination and social disadvantage which strengthen solidarity and group cohesion, alongside boosting the self-consciousness of the group. Ethnic identity is important because it serves as a reference point for evaluating oneself and helps in self-understanding.<sup>8</sup>

However, national identity is equally influential in this context; Smith defines ‘nationality’ as an ideological movement and the consequent ‘national identity’ as the continuous reproduction, reinterpretation and transmission of a pattern of symbols, values and traditions that represent the distinctive heritage and identification for individuals with the cultural elements of that heritage.<sup>9</sup> The national belonging of CIS Koreans, as we have seen, has undergone

many changes in a short span of time. They were first subjects of tsarist Russia, then Soviet citizens and lastly, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, they acquired citizenship of the republic they were living in. However, the lack of stability due to ever changing geopolitical circumstances in the area, has clearly fuelled feelings of “non-belonging” seen in their interest in moving away from the republic of residence, towards Russia or South Korea.<sup>10</sup>

**A**n important part of identity retention is language. Koryo Saram lived far away from their ancestral homeland for over a century and that resulted in a lower percentage of ancestral language retention in later generations, also due to protection policies enacted under Stalin’s government. Nevertheless, Koryo Saram showed Resilience in maintaining their traditions alive

[7] Yoon, 2000

[8] *ibid.*

[9] Smith, A.D., (1991). *National Identity*. Reno, Las Vegas, London: University of Nevada Press

[10] Jo, 2018

despite the challenges it implied. Under Lenin, they could use community funds to establish newspapers and theatres, and have kept observing major Korean holidays, wearing hanbok during celebrations, making traditional food and playing traditional Korean games.<sup>11</sup> Yoon (2000) conducted a study among Koreans in rural and urban Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan on the levels and characteristics of ethnic identity by generation. The majority of the respondents identified themselves as more Korean than Russian or local. Through the re-creation, or maybe more correctly said “re-adaptation”, of Korean traditions in Central Asia, Koryo Saram managed to maintain strong emotional ties with their ancestral land which fostered ethnic attachment and fuelled the creation of an affective connection to the idealised ancestral land (for later-generation diasporans).

Language is a fundamental part of identity retention and passing it on to later generations is key in maintaining strong ties with the ancestral homeland in diasporas. First-generation CIS Koreans spoke mostly Korean but already with the generation after them the use of Russian became increasingly essential and younger generations struggled to keep using Korean in their day-to-day interactions. At the same time, while

Lenin’s ethnic policy in the Soviet Union saw all ethnic languages as equal to Russian and even took advantage of the linguistic plurality to teach the political doctrine to different crowds, Stalin’s attitude to linguistic plurality was completely different. From the 1930s, his protectionist policy surrounding language has greatly limited the use of heritage languages and Koryo Saram were not free to practise their traditions anymore.

In post-Soviet times, new policies and the advent of Hallyu has revitalised Korean both within the diaspora and outside of it. There was an expansion of language schools where Soviet Koreans could learn Korean and South Korean missionaries started travelling to Central Asia, giving later generation CIS Koreans the chance to hear about South Korea from current citizens. At the same time, with the end of the Soviet Union also came the need to adapt to the new geopolitical changes that saw an increased importance of local languages (the languages of the republics in the CIS) for livelihood. The increased interest in learning their heritage language coupled with the increased visibility of Korea in the global political-scape, created the conditions for later-generation Soviet Koreans to migrate to the peninsula.

[11] *ibid.*

[12] *ibid.*, 7

# Conclusion

Diaspora Koreans have been increasingly more interested in South Korea for different reasons, depending on their community of origin. For CIS Koreans, South Korea has mostly been a distant land they heard about in the stories of their grandparents who have heard stories from their own grandparents. Legacy migration, as Ji-Yeon Jo (2018) calls it, was born out of the needs of the diaspora communities to reconnect to their ancestral homeland in a way that accounted for the unique conditions of diaspora communities. As defined by the author, legacy migration indicates the trajectory of partial mobility that combines both migration and

long-term residence in one's ancestral homeland by later-generation diasporans whose knowledge of their ancestral homeland is informed by second-hand reporting.<sup>12</sup> Korean peoplehood is currently changing, also thanks to the influx of diasporans into the peninsula. Korean peoplehood has been often thought as monolithic, but in reality conceptualising modern peoplehood as an inclusionary group identity that shares a history and a distinct way of life opens up opportunities for rethinking how “common consciousness” is created and sustained, but more importantly it gives space to rethink what it means to be Korean by creating the space for native Koreans and diaspora Koreans to interact with and learn from each other.

