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Ethnic Minorities in Uzbekistan : The case of Koreans¹⁾

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Uzbekistan

In Central Asia, there are several different social groups, which by virtue of their history, culture, economic status, geographic location, gender, race or other such distinguishing features, would be defined as minorities in relation to a dominant majority²⁾. This paper, however, is concerned only with groups of minorities living in Uzbekistan; that is ethnic groups, or in Soviet terms, nationalities which are domiciled in a state in which they are ethnically different from the titular group (e.g. Koreans, or Russians in Uzbekistan).

Uzbekistan, at the time of its creation as a Soviet Socialist Republic was a multi-ethnic state. The ethnic diversity was however, greatly increased in the period 1925–52. Initially hundreds of thousands of immigrants, mostly from the Slav republics, were moved there. They included party activists, administrators, military, security and law enforcement personnel, professional and skilled technicians. There were also political exiles. During the Second World War, there was another wave of immigration, most of these people being placed in the industrial enterprises that were relocated from the endangered western republics to Uzbekistan. Considerable numbers of orphaned and homeless children from these republics were also sent there, some of them were adopted by local families and the remainder were placed in state orphanages. The larger group of the next migration, however, were the Apunished peoples, entire populations who were accused of treason to the Soviet state. About over half a million of the three million people exiled to Central Asia in the period 1936–52, were sent to Uzbekistan under the special settlement regime. These included, Koreans from the Maritime province; Meskhetian Turks from Georgia; Tatars from the Crimea and Kazan; Chechens and Ossetins from the Caucasus; Jews from Ukraine, Belarus and Russian Federation; Germans from the Volga; Pontic Greeks from the Black Sea region and several others.²⁾ There was a huge loss of life and an immense amount of suffering during and immediately after the deportations.

Ethnic Minorities in Uzbekistan

According to the 1989 Soviet Census (so far the latest official one), there were 100 ethnic groups listed in Uzbekistan³⁾. The main historical and cultural divide between ethnic minorities groups in the republic, was and still is, the immigrant and the indigenous communities. The immigrants include voluntary migrants, mainly of Slav origin, who were drawn from different social backgrounds, and the deported peoples, who had been transported en masse. Although most small groups have been assimilated, the deported people, to a large extent, retained their original social structures. This was, in addition to their different customs and languages, protected by the stigma of their alleged treachery which remained with them long after they had been rehabilitated, and which put a distance between them and the local population.

Until 1989, of the 100 ethnic groups that were listed in the Anational census in Uzbekistan, 21 groups were represented by under 100 persons; 37 groups were in the 100–1,000 range; and 17 were in the 1000–10,000 range. There were 13 represented by groups over 10,000 to 100,000. In the 100,000 to 1 million range there were 10 groups. The two groups beyond 1 million were Uzbeks as the largest titular group, and the Russians as the second largest minority group.

Koreans

The presence of the Korean minority in Uzbekistan is the result of decades of Russo-Soviet and Japanese imperialistic rivalry for control of the Korean Peninsula, dating back 130 years.³⁾ In 1979 the population of Koreans in Uzbekistan stood at 163,100, while the 1989 All-Union population census recorded 183,100 Koreans in Uzbekistan. By 1997, there were 200,000 Koreans in Uzbekistan, of which 50,000 lived in Tashkent, the remainder residing in other centres such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Khorezm and Karakalpakistan. Thirty per cent of the Koreans work in the agricultural sector, 30 per cent in business markets, and the rest, about 38 percent, form part of the intellectual community: artists, writers, academicians and scientists. About one to two per cent of the Koreans are believed to be unemployed. They have, to a large extent, been Russian culture oriented people, the majority of whom are now Russian speakers. About 20 per cent are Christians, 1–2 per cent are Muslims and the rest are non-religious. Buddhism has almost died out among the Koreans in Uzbekistan. About 70 per cent of them speak Uzbek reasonably well. The relationship between Koreans and Uzbeks is not excellent, but it is good. In general, there does not seem to be any obvious discrimination against Koreans, and no conflict is foreseen between the

Koreans and Uzbeks. Today almost all of the Koreans in Uzbekistan, with the exception of the immigrants, are descendants of those who were deported from the Maritime Province.

Russia annexed the Maritime Province in 1860 with the signing of the treaty of Peking with China. The government of Tsar Alexander II extended its grip on the Pacific coast of the Amur River until 1889. The new conquests, east of the Ussuri River, provided Russia with a strip of the Pacific coast as far as the Korean border along the Tumen River. Russia emphasized the strategic significance of this territorial gain by the immediate construction of Vladivostok, the role of which was to plant the empire firmly and permanently on the Pacific coast. In 1895 immediately after China was defeated by Japan, both Russia and Japan openly adopted rival ambitions for Korea for imperial reasons. This led to the 1904–5 Russo-Japanese war which ended in humiliating defeat of the Tsarist Empire. Consequently, on 22 August 1910, Korea became a Japanese colony causing thousands of Koreans to flee north into Russian territory. A large number of Koreans, over 30,000 had already migrated northward before 1904. These were mainly farmers or workers attracted by the big construction projects stimulated by Russia's fast expansion in the Maritime Province since 1860. A third wave of Koreans, largely peasants, came north to escape the famine of 1869. All those who entered the Russian territory by 25 June 1884 received Russian citizenship. Those who came after 1905 were mostly Korean political refugees escaping Japanese occupation. They proposed to fight for the liberation of their country, hoping to obtain political support from the Russian Empire. Russia however, concealed the same colonial ambitions for Korea as the Japanese. Nevertheless, the Russians represented for the Koreans the best sponsor to evict the Japanese; for the Russians, the Koreans were a potential front army unit for future Russian anti-Japanese policies on behalf of Korea.

From 1905 to 1917 Korean refugees organized themselves and established a Korean community organization, which became a *de facto* movement for Korean liberation. This organization soon became a centre of anti-Japanese activity, posing a problem for the Russian authorities. With the Russo-Japanese treaties and the Convention of 1907, Russia officially recognized Japanese presence in Korea. Although they did not want to prevent Korean armed units from training and crossing the border into northern Korea, Russia eventually had to abide by the Russo-Japanese Treaty of Extradition signed in 1911, bowed to Japanese pressure to put restraints on its Koreans. However, the Tsarist authorities agreed to move many of them northward into Siberia far from the Korean border, rather than sending them back to Korea.

During the October revolution, however, the majority of Koreans sided with the Bolsheviks as they played the anti-imperialist card. The Bolsheviks opened all the prisons in the region and released radical Korean political prisoners. By April 1918, Russian Koreans came together to form the All-Russian Korean Association, which stemmed from their collective fear of a Japanese invasion of the Maritime Province. As a result of this fear, Koreans and the Bolshevik Soviets became natural allies throughout the civil war. After the Bolsheviks re-emerged as the dominant force in the Maritime Province in mid 1919, there began an open struggle for control of the Province between the Japanese and the Bolsheviks, the latter being supported by some well trained and motivated Korean units. By October 1922 the Japanese had withdrawn back to Korea from the southern segment of the Maritime province, which then became incorporated into the Russian Soviet Socialist Federal Republic, as part of the USSR. The Koreans witnessed the reinstatement of the pre-1917 *status quo* under the Tsar and the international border remained the same; the Japanese held Korea, while the Russians, in the form of the Bolsheviks, remained the reluctant hosts of militant Koreans, though the latter emerged from the civil war overwhelmingly pro-Communist. After 1922, all Koreans were invited to take full USSR citizenship and expected to adopt Soviet values in line with Lenin's script. Subsequently they should integrate into Soviet society though only a small number accepted citizenship. On the other hand, as a result of a new wave of Koreans exiled during 1925-26, the proportion of Koreans who refused the offer remained about 60 per cent. The majority of Koreans perceived themselves as temporarily inside the Soviet Union, but hoping to go back soon to an independent Korea. Hence they were against the assimilation policies of the Soviet government.

Those Koreans who had adopted citizenship moved north and westwards for land work, while the majority of those Koreans who refused citizenship remained in the Maritime Province. From 1923 and throughout the early Stalin years, the Koreans in the Province engaged in some political participation, many becoming members of the Communist Party. They enjoyed a fair amount of state approved cultural life but all requests for a Korean autonomous province within the Soviet Union were rejected. In September 1931 when Japan invaded Manchuria, virtually all Koreans in the Union allied with the Soviet regime. This was also shown by non-opposition to Stalin's decree of 1932 ordering all Koreans to become citizens of the Soviet Union. There appeared a golden era in the relationship between Moscow and the Korean minority. This however, did not survive long. With the agreement between Japan and the Soviet Union in early 1935, Moscow complied with Japanese requests to curb all Korean activities in the

province. This coincided with the nationwide purges. Koreans were accused of espionage and other charges, and that they had been infiltrated by Japanese agents. Stalin ordered the mass deportation of Koreans to Central Asia to join a large number of Koreans who had migrated there voluntarily in the early years of the Soviet regime. Within three months, entire villages and towns in the Maritime Province were cleared of Koreans. They suffered enormously during the deportation era and a large number died from cold, disease or hunger. By 1937 exiled Koreans arrived in Uzbekistan where they were placed in certain rural areas, with their movement being restricted. Yet the local Uzbeks extended them hospitality, helping them to survive in the face of government brutality. During 1937-39 about 75,000 Koreans arrived in the republic. In 1937 during the purges, 70 percent of Korean intellectuals were allegedly removed and killed. Stalin thought that there were many Japanese spies among the Koreans who thus had to be cleared. The peasants were left untouched. After the punitive regime was relaxed in 1954, citizenship was re-offered and most Koreans took up the offer. They were allowed to settle in urban areas, where they attended schools, universities and institutes. They also began to join collective farms where they contributed greatly in the cultivation of cotton and rice. They worked very hard and made good use of whatever facilities were available to them. The post war generation produced many agricultural specialists, scientists, writers and intellectuals. They were not however, allowed into the military schools until 1958, with the first group graduating in 1968. The chairman of the Korean cultural centre in Tashkent, a retired colonel, Peter Kim was one of the first Koreans to enroll for the military school.

After the break up of the Soviet Union, the entire region witnessed the so-called Aepic of the Renaissance, all the nationalities of the old Soviet Union, suddenly seeking to rediscover their pasts. Koreans were among these nationalities. For the past 70 years, the national cultures were forbidden, the only Anational culture being Soviet culture. The large nations such as the Uzbeks, Kazaks, Tajiks and Turkmen enjoyed limited privileges, but smaller ethnic minorities had no cultural rights at all. In 1993 an International Cultural Centre was established in Uzbekistan dedicated to protecting and supporting the cultural rights of minorities in Uzbekistan. The Korean Cultural Centre was also formed as part of this organization. In 1994 one Korean MP was elected to the Uzbek Parliament (he is also a director of a large factory). Two Korean Chairs, one at the Institute of Oriental Studies, the other at the University of World Languages, were also established for this cause. Courses in the Korean language are also provided at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy.

The reaction of Koreans to the break up of the Soviet Union was neutral, but they were enthusiastic about independence for Uzbekistan because it gave them the chance to regain their culture, history and way of life. They have benefited from established governmental and non-governmental links with South Korea. Although the old generation wants to go back to South Korea, the young generation considers Uzbekistan their mother-land. The Republic of Korea, is in any case, not willing to take them back, as there are major differences in their culture. Instead, they preferred to invest in Uzbekistan to improve their fellow nationals conditions in Central Asia as well as discovering new markets. In Uzbekistan there is an effort to open more Korean schools and theatres, publish a newspaper in the Korean language, establish more Korean folklore groups and promote national songs and dances among their school children. The Koreans have substituted their short-lived Soviet citizenship with the new Uzbek citizenship but they prefer to live and remain as Koreans. Prospects for them in Uzbekistan are promising. In terms of income and status today, they appear to be the most successful of the minority groups in the republic.

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