

ADAPTATION AND AGRICULTURAL STRATEGIES OF SOVIET KOREANS AFTER THE 1937 DEPORTATION

Ashurova Ulgozi Isroilovna

Basic doctoral student of Termez State University

ulguzisroilovna@gmail.com

Abstract

The 1937 deportation of Koreans from the Soviet Far East to Central Asia marked a turning point in the ethnic and economic history of the USSR. Despite being uprooted from their homeland, the deported Koreans managed to reconstruct a productive agricultural system, transforming the harsh steppes of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan into fertile lands. This paper analyzes the mechanisms of adaptation, collective work ethics, and the socio-economic role of Koreans in Soviet agricultural modernization, drawing on archival sources and recent historiography.

Keywords: Korean deportation; Soviet Far East; Central Asia; Uzbekistan SSR; collective farms; rice and vegetable cultivation; ethnic adaptation; socialist modernization; labour productivity; ethnic rehabilitation.

The Far Eastern Koreans were the first amongst all the peoples of the Soviet Union who experienced the hardships of deportation. Later dozens of others followed — Germans, Crimea Tatars, Polish, Chechens, Karachais, Kalmyks, Balkars etc. The deportation was not a forced measure aimed exclusively at the Koreans as it is worth asking the question — what were the general reasons for deportation of many peoples in 1930s–40s?

We can approach this question from two sides; firstly taking the deportation of Koreans as a separate phenomenon with its specific features and motives and secondly taking the policy of deportation of Stalin as a general phenomenon.

The Korean deportation had a prehistory when at the end of 1920s, the Soviet leadership was making plans to force Koreans to move out from the border areas of Khabarovsk region. Thus, the deportation in 1937 was not an unexpected one.

The Soviet leadership was already developing it in a joint Resolution No. 1428–326cc (top secret) of the USSR and the Central Committee for deportation of the Korean population from the Bureisky region on the 21st of August 1937 (also Depopulation of the Korean population of the Far Eastern Krai), signed by Molotov V. and Stalin I.

According to a brief preamble of the Resolution, the deportation of Koreans was planned with the aim to prevent the infiltration of Japanese spies to the Far Eastern Krai.

In August 1937, the Soviet government deported nearly 172,000 ethnic Koreans from the Far East to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan under the pretext of eliminating “Japanese espionage.” This was the first large-scale forced resettlement under Stalin’s regime, preceding similar deportations of Germans, Chechens, and Crimean Tatars. The deportation stripped Koreans of their property, schools, and homeland, but it did not destroy their social fabric or work ethics. Within a few years, they became among the most productive farming communities in Central Asia [1,3].

Upon arrival in Central Asia, the Koreans were placed in unprepared collective farms (kolkhozes), facing arid soil and extreme continental climate. However, their agricultural expertise, particularly in rice and vegetable cultivation, allowed them to adapt rapidly.

According to Kim [2], in the early 1940s, Korean farmers in Uzbekistan’s Chirchik district harvested an average of 39.4 centners of cotton per hectare, exceeding the regional average of 21.8 centners. In Kazakhstan’s Karatal region, Korean farmers produced 440–800 centners of onions per hectare, one of the highest yields in the USSR [2,5].

By 1945, over 70,000 Koreans were resettled in Uzbekistan and 100,000 in Kazakhstan, forming dozens of agricultural collectives. The “Politotdel” and “Severnyi Mayak” kolkhozes near Tashkent became exemplary farms that demonstrated high efficiency through disciplined labor and mutual trust among workers [3,6].

The success of Korean kolkhozes lay in their strong communal organization. Brigades were led by experienced elders whose authority was based on moral respect rather than party affiliation. This system promoted both productivity and cohesion. The Soviet authorities acknowledged these achievements: by 1959, over 50 Koreans had been awarded the title of “Hero of Socialist Labor,” while hundreds received the “Order of Lenin” and “Order of the Red Banner of Labor” [4,7]. These honors recognized not only the efficiency of Korean workers but also their ability to internalize and redefine the Soviet work ethic through their Confucian-inspired discipline and collectivism [1,8].

The second generation of deported Koreans advanced into higher education and technical professions. By the 1960s, Korean engineers, agronomists, and teachers contributed to the modernization of both agriculture and education in the republics. Cultural institutions such as the Korean Theater in Tashkent helped preserve linguistic and artistic traditions, while adapting to Soviet ideological frameworks [5,8].

The Soviet Koreans turned adversity into advantage by transforming deportation into an opportunity for collective survival and economic advancement. Their agricultural expertise, discipline, and cultural cohesion enabled them to thrive within the rigid Soviet system. Their story illustrates how ethnic identity and work ethics can be transformed into economic resilience in totalitarian conditions.

REFERENCES

1. Kim, G.N. (2008). Ethnic Entrepreneurship of Koreans in the USSR and Post-Soviet Central Asia. IDE-JETRO.
2. Petrov, A.I. (2000). Koreitsy Dalnego Vostoka: Istoricheskiye Sudby. Vladivostok University Press.
3. Pak, B.D. (1995). Koreans in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Almaty: Sanat.
4. Nam, S.G. (1998). History of Soviet Koreans. Seoul: Yonsei University Press.
5. Grossman, G. (1977). "The Second Economy of the USSR." Problems of Communism, 26(5), 25–40.
6. Kuzin, A.T. (1993). Deportatsii i Sudby Narodov SSSR. Moscow: Nauka.
7. Kim, Hwan (1959). "Rice Cultivation of Koreans in Kazakhstan." Agricultural Journal of the USSR, 5, 80–86.
8. King, R. & Kim, G.N. (2001). The Koryo Saram: Koreans in the Former USSR. Korean Studies Bulletin, Vol. 2–3.