NATIONAL REHABILITATION THROUGH LABOUR: A CASE STUDY OF KOREAN KOLKHOZES IN THE UZBEKISTAN SSR (1937–1980)

Ashurova Ulgozi Isroilovna
Basic doctoral student of Termez State University
ulguzisroilovna@gmail.com

Between 1937 and 1938, over 172,000 ethnic Koreans were deported from the Soviet Far East to Central Asia under NKVD Resolution No. 1428–326ss, justified as a measure "to suppress Japanese espionage in the Far Eastern territories" [1, p.2]. However, historians such as Gelb (1995) emphasize that the deportation was part of Stalin's broader ethnic engineering project rather than a genuine security concern [2, p.36–38]. The deported population included even remote communities from Okhotsk and Magadan, far beyond any military relevance [1, p.2; 2, p.40].

Settled primarily in Lower, Middle, and Upper Chirchik districts near Tashkent, Koreans were faced with barren, swampy land. They drained wetlands, built clay houses, and roofed them with reeds — fighting wolves, snakes, and the Turan tiger [1, p.3]. Oral histories record that local Uzbeks and Kazakhs shared food and shelter, mitigating initial prejudice [3, p.121]. Yet the newcomers were often met with xenophobic suspicion; Denisov (1966) noted that the stereotype of Koreans as "dog eaters" circulated even among collective farm administrators [4, p.59].

By 1940, Koreans were prohibited from joining the Red Army and were instead placed in labour battalions to perform forced work in forestry and construction [2, p.41]. After 1945, the same "labour identity" became a source of redemption: through discipline, productivity, and education, Koreans began to rebuild their image within the Soviet state [1, p.4–5].

This study relies on the research of Chang & Park (2013) [1], who conducted 59 oral history interviews in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan between 2006–2010, as well as secondary literature from Gelb (1995) [2], Kim (2007) [5], Park (1999) [6], Pak (2003) [7], and Hwan (1959) [8]. The methodological approach integrates qualitative oral testimonies with Soviet-era agrarian statistics and historical monographs to trace how deported Koreans transformed collective labour into a path of social mobility and moral rehabilitation.

After deportation, Koreans were organized into collective farms focusing on rice, wheat, kenaf, maize, and cotton cultivation [1, p.4–5]. Kenaf, a fiber crop reaching 2.8 meters in height, was particularly significant because Soviet agronomists calculated yields by weight, favoring heavy crops [1, p.5; 7, p.112]. As early as the 1940s, Korean farmers outperformed their Slavic counterparts in productivity due to their meticulous irrigation and team-based organization [6, p.59].

A striking case is that of Lee Yen Ho, who at 15 led a kenaf brigade of 130 workers and was awarded the title Hero of Socialist Labour, regularly invited to rest at Sochi's union sanatorium [1, p.5]. Hwan (1959) confirms that the brigade method allowed Korean farmers to maximize collective efficiency, transforming their labour into a model of socialist virtue [8, p.82].

By the 1960s, kolkhozes such as Politotdel, Sverdlov, Dimitrov, and Kim Pen Hva (Polar Star) had become model collectives, producing over 1 million roubles of output per year [1, p.6]. Each kolkhoz counted 11–12 Heroes of Socialist Labour, indicating elite performance levels [1, p.6; 5, p.101]. Moscow awarded these collectives with paved roads, electricity, schools, libraries, clinics, and even an endocrinology research station [1, p.6; 3, p.119].

According to Kim (2007), this infrastructure boom represented a "bottom-up modernization" — a case where a deported minority advanced socialist progress from the periphery rather than from the center [5, p.99].

Korean women, including Ok In Pak and Nadezhda Li, worked seven days a week from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., often sleeping only a few hours [1, p.4]. Their labour symbolized gender equality within socialist ideology but also revealed the double burden of production and domestic care [3, p.123]. As Pak (2003) argued, women's collective participation in brigades not only improved farm output but also altered traditional Korean family structures, promoting female leadership and literacy [7, p.109–110].

By the 1970s, Koreans had become known as trudolyubivyi narod — "a hardworking people" — replacing earlier pejorative stereotypes [1, p.18]. The Politotdel kolkhoz, in particular, produced athletes, engineers, and doctors who became symbols of Soviet internationalism [6, p.65]. According to Park (1999), such cultural capital allowed Koreans to gain prestige not through political privilege but through moral legitimacy derived from labour [6, p.62–63].

The success of Korean collective farms challenged the Soviet ethno-political hierarchy, in which Russians were considered primus inter pares ("first among equals") [2, p.37]. As Chang and Park note, Politotdel became a field of habitus — a sociocultural space where deportees redefined work as moral citizenship [1, p.6–7]. This hybrid of Confucian diligence and Marxist collectivism produced a unique "Korean-Soviet work ethic."

While other deported groups, such as Volga Germans or Crimean Tatars, demanded political autonomy, Koreans created functional cultural autonomies within their kolkhozes [5, p.105]. They maintained language and social cohesion through education, music ensembles, and sports clubs. Brezhnev's 1970 visit to the Politotdel farm, alongside Uzbek leader Sharof Rashidov, symbolized the state's recognition of the Korean community's contribution to socialist progress [1, p.19; 9, p.88].

The history of Korean kolkhozes in Uzbekistan — Politotdel, Sverdlov, Dimitrov, and Kim Pen Hva — demonstrates how labour served simultaneously as an economic engine and a

moral narrative of rehabilitation. Through collective organization, discipline, and innovation, deported Koreans transformed barren lands into prosperous socialist enterprises.

By the 1970s, they had produced dozens of Heroes of Socialist Labour, built modern infrastructure, and reshaped local perceptions of ethnicity and citizenship [1, p.5–6; 5, p.101]. Their experience fulfilled the ideological promise of the Soviet Union: that equality could be earned through work. From deportation victims to model citizens, the Koreans of Central Asia became living proof of the paradoxical success of Stalin's deportation policy — oppression turned into empowerment through labour [2, p.44; 9, p.90].

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