

# Social and Cultural Adaptation of Korean Youth in the Former USSR (1920s-1930s)

Zhanna SON

## Abstract

*This article analyzes social and cultural adaptation of Korean youth in the former USSR in 1920s–1930s. After the March First Movement in 1919, the Korean youth were cruelly prosecuted by the Japanese gendarmerie. Thousands of young Koreans were forced to leave their homeland and seek shelter in Manchuria or the Russian (Soviet) Far East. The adaptation of Korean youth to economic, political, and cultural life in Soviet Russia had several stages, as they sought to obtain legal status and find a niche in the production chain sufficient to sustain their long-term existence in a strange land. Each turning period in Russian history transformed the mentality and sense of national identity of Korean youth, and consequently Korean culture and language underwent transformation. With each transition period, the Korean migrants' native language was used less and less in public places, and over time, it was spoken only among family and friends. Thus, the Koreans gradually became integrated into Russian culture and the Russian language became their primary language of communication.*

**Keywords:** Soviet power, political repressions, the Communist Party, Korean revolutionaries, enlightenment, education

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## Introduction

This article examines problems of social and cultural adaptation of Korean youth in the young Soviet Republic during the 1920s and 1930s. The topic is important for several reasons. First, as is well-known, Korean youth played an important role in organizing the March First Movement in 1919. After these nationwide demonstrations, many young Koreans were cruelly prosecuted by the Japanese gendarmerie. Thousands of young Koreans were forced to leave their homeland and seek shelter in Manchuria or the Russian (Soviet) Far East (Institute of Korean Independence Movement Studies 2013).

Second, I understand social and cultural adaptation as a mode of personal or group interaction in an alien social milieu. The most important component of adaptation is reconciliation of one's self-esteem and ambitions with the realities of a different society. Moreover, the adaptation of Korean youth to economic, political, and cultural life in Soviet Russia depended on obtaining legal status and finding a niche in the production chain sufficient to sustain one's long-term existence in a strange land. Social adaptation of Korean youth was characterized by a set of unique features for which it is not easy to find parallels in world history. One form of evidence for this is the present, rather high status of Russophone Koreans in the former Soviet Republic.

Third, each turning period in Russian history transformed the mentality and sense of national identity of Koreans in Russia. Consequently, Korean culture and language underwent transformations on Russian soil. With each transition period, migrant Koreans used their native language less and less in public places, and over time, it was spoken only among family and friends. Thus, the Koreans gradually became integrated into Russian culture, and the Russian language became their primary language of communication.

In this article, the author has followed the general requirements applicable to historical research. They are defined in the methodological plan by the principles of historicism and concreteness. Analysis, synthesis, complexity, constructiveness, a comparative approach to the material studied and its generalization were used as general scientific principles.

In analysis of the productive and educational activities of Koreans, the author views these activities not from the perspective of their economical efficiency, but as a social and cultural conditioning factor, and as a prerequisite for creating conditions facilitating cultural adaptation. The challenge of detecting general and particular traits in the process of Korean youth adaptation determined the application of comparative historical methodology.

The author concludes that Korean youth, regardless of their place of birth (Korea, China, or Russia), easily adapted to life in the former USSR and in the struggle to find its rightful place in the existing socioeconomic structure of the socialist state. One factor which facilitated their social advancement was the Soviet policies favorable toward youth hailing from peasant and worker families. By contrast, children from educated and/or wealthy families (including *kulaks*, or richer peasant families) were subjected to suspicion and often targeted for repression. While social advancement from the very bottom was encouraged, former elites were always suspected of being enemies or spies.

### **Korean Youth in the 1920s**

The advance guard of Korean youth in the young Soviet Republic became leading figures and participants in Komsomol (Youth Communist League) organizations, arising out of the March First movement in Shanghai, Manchuria, and the Soviet Far East that had also interacted actively with the Communist International in Moscow (Son 2013b).

The Korean youth movement in the former USSR of the 1920s has received relatively little attention by either Russian or international historiography. My analysis of different youth organizations, including the first Komsomol organizations in Korea, Manchuria, Japan, and Russia, is based on newly uncovered papers and Russian archival materials concerning the Korean youth movement. The main aims and objectives of these youth organizations—as noted in the documents themselves—were not focused solely the fight against the colonial domination of Japan. An additional

primary undertaking of Korean youth was a public awareness campaign, orientated towards the extirpation of traditional life customs, and the struggle for equality in society and within the family.<sup>1</sup>

In South Korean historiography in particular there is a neglect of the youth movement in many publications translated into Russian, such as those by Lee Ki-baik (2000), Han Yeong-u (2010), and Kang Man-gil (2011); no more than one or two pages are devoted to the topic in these works. Nevertheless these works note that the advance guard of the independence movement was composed mainly of Korean youth.

In the chapter titled “Daejung undong-ui seongjang” (Development of Popular Movements) in *Hanguk dongnip undong-ui yeoksa* (A History of the Korean Independence Movement), the youth movement is covered in two sections: youth movement and student movement, where the names of youth organizations are listed but without any analysis of their activities (Institute of Korean Independence Movement Studies 2013). The authors of this publication nonetheless note the important role and significance of the youth movement.

It should be noted that students, young workers, and peasant youth represented one of the primary forces in the struggle for Korean independence. Regardless of the fact that Korean settlement took place across the immense territory of North-East Asia (Korea, Manchuria, China, the Soviet Far East, and Japan), Korean youth played a significant part in the active struggle against the Japanese authorities.

In 1921, a report made by representatives of the Korean Federation of Youth Leagues and representatives of Korean youth communist cells expressed the requirements for establishing human equality in Korean society. They spoke about granting rights to women, and about the low level of education in schools.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii, RGASPI) (1921), 533, finding aid 10, case 1878, list 1–48; case 1879, list 1–12; case 1890, list 7.
  2. *Protokol pervogo soveshchaniia koreiskoi delegatsii ot 12 dekabria 1921 goda* (Report of Proceedings at First Meeting of Korean Delegation of December 12, 1921). RGASPI, f. 533, finding aid 10, case 1880, list 7.

The report notes that after finishing traditional Korean schooling, “the youth come out of school with only a firmly established knowledge of various traditions: veneration of elders, kneeling down (literally) in front of superiors, veneration of the deceased, blood feud, etc. It is clear that Korean youth are not able to develop further with such knowledge, and, therefore, until the end of the first half of the nineteenth century Korea was an entirely primitive country. The entire country—the leaders as well as the masses—were living in ignorance.”<sup>3</sup>

The history of Korean youth, as this same report points out, was indeed tragic. Young people in western countries and parts of Asia (Japan and China) had access to education and involvement in world culture, and thus material and spiritual progress. Up until the mid-nineteenth century, Korean youth, as well as the Korean middle class and proletariat, were in complete ignorance, “fossilized in the clueless traditions of the country without any opportunity to acquire even elementary knowledge.”<sup>4</sup>

“Many Korean students from proletarian families ran away almost naked to the neighboring countries of Japan, China, and Russia” to obtain the necessary education.<sup>5</sup> The revolutionary appeals proclaimed in Russia in 1917 had an extraordinary impact on young Koreans. They rushed into the young Soviet Republic to learn “socialism,” and dreamt of freeing Korea from the Japanese in order to build in their motherland a state based on the concepts of equality and liberty.

### **Ethnic Migration in the Far East in the 1920s**

The young Soviet Republic proclaimed the equality of nations and peoples, the liquidation of oppression, social equity, and satisfaction of the needs of the masses as its basic state-building concepts. At the same time, the application of strict repressive measures was unavoidable with respect to

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3. RGASPI, f. 533, finding aid 10, case 1880, list 8.

4. RGASPI, f. 533, finding aid 10, case 1880, list 9–10.

5. RGASPI, f. 533, finding aid 10, case 1880, list 9–10. *Doklad Ob'edinennoï organizatsii Koreïskoï molodezhi* (Report of the United Korean Youth Organization) (1921), list 13.

those who did not “correctly” perceive the new social system, new order, and newly established regime.

In connection with this, between 1917 and 1922, there was a significant increase in the flow of Korean migrants to the Russian Far East. The March First Movement in Korea in 1919 caused a new wave of Koreans escaping to Russia. Although in 1917 there were 52,300 Koreans recorded in the southern agricultural area of the Primor’e, by 1923 this number had reached 91,600. The increase in population was especially high in the Ol’ginskii (99.3%) and Pos’etskii (97.7%) districts of Vladivostok county and also in Nikol’sk-Ussuriisk county (77.2%). The average age of the immigrants was between 18 and 30 (Son 2013b).

According to the census statistics, 9,308 Korean households were registered in the Primor’e Governorate in 1917 and 18,407 households in 1922. In terms of quantity, the dynamics of Korean population distribution, though incompletely documented, can be described in the following way. In the Primor’e Governorate in 1922 were living 104,660 citizens of Korean ethnicity (of whom 27,197 were Russian subjects); the rural population was 93,696, while the urban population (workers and lower middle class) was 10,964 (Son 2013b).

By the end of the 1920s the Korean population of the Russian Far East had increased significantly. From a report concerning work among the Korean population of the Far Eastern Territory between October 1, 1926 and October 1, 1927, by Kim Gil-yeong of the National Minorities under the Presidium of the Far Eastern Territory Executive Committee, and based upon the census data of 1926, the population of the Far Eastern Territory was as follows: 1,881,351 total population, of which 1,174,915 were Russians, 315,203 Ukrainians, 162,366 Koreans, 80,157 Chinese, 41,124 Belarusians, 8,163 Poles, 6,073 Tatars, 8,646 Buryats, 7,733 Jews, 3,732 Moldavians, 2,452 Germans, 2,514 Latvians, 1,066 Lithuanians, 1,224 Yakuts, 2,712 Mordvins, 894 Gypsies, 54,423 members of nationalities of the Northern border districts (aborigines), and 7,954 other “small peoples.”<sup>6</sup> Within the confines

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6. State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvennyj arhiv Rossijskoj Federacii, GARF) (1926), f. 1235, finding aid 120, case 60, list 29.

of the Russian Far Eastern Territory, then, there lived some 162,366 Koreans, of whom 145,511 lived in the Vladivostok District and 16,855 lived in other districts and territories.<sup>7</sup>

Leonid Rybakovskii (1990, 77–78) has calculated that six years into Soviet rule in the Russian Far East, 100,000 Korean peoples had resettled there, two-thirds of Koreans there had gained Soviet citizenship, and one-third were temporarily residing in the former USSR. However, industrialization, dekulakization, and complete collectivization were unable to improve interethnic relations. On the contrary, in general the local population was aggressively disposed to the new Korean migrants and blocked acceptance of the “aliens” in every possible way.

The large migrant populations comprising various ethnic groups and from varied social strata moved throughout the territory of the former USSR. The chaotic migration of such masses was unamenable to control by the authorities. All these factors aggravated interethnic relations between locals and Korean “aliens.”

It is well known that at the end of the 1920s a “crusade against nationalism” took hold across the former USSR. In the estimation of most researchers, one of the factors igniting and aggravating local nationalism was not only Soviet “localization policy,” but also the unreasonable resettlement policy carried out in an orderly fashion across the entire former USSR with the aim of raising national economic and defense capabilities (Son 2011).

By the 1930s, the problems of nationalism had reached their zenith when at every meeting of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Council of People’s Commissars of the former USSR, it was necessary to orientate and adjudicate practically all regions of the country. Thus, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the former USSR on April 20, 1930 issued a decree titled: “Throughout the territory of the former USSR let us secure together economic and political development in consecutive stages and adopt policies on various ethnicities and comprehensive care services for national minorities.”<sup>8</sup>

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7. GARF (1926), f. 1235, finding aid 120, case 60, list 29.

8. GARF (1930), f. r. 3316, finding aid 2, case 1073, list 21.

By the end of the 1920s the Koreans as an ethnic minority group were experiencing enormous difficulties because of both “great-power chauvinism and local nationalism.” Migrants arriving in the Russian Far East from central districts of Russia met for the first time in their lives peoples of another ethnicity, who frequently took pains to persecute and beat up these *aziaty*, or orientals, leading in many cases to litigation.<sup>9</sup>

Koreans had an opportunity to acquire the former citizenship after conclusion of the “Soviet–Japanese Basic Convention” on January 25, 1925. This was related to the fact that Japan was continuing to make demands for the return of all Koreans to the Japanese Empire (Sevostianov 2007, 325:330). In practice, by the end of the 1920s all Koreans who were legally resident in the former USSR had Soviet citizenship.

During the initial period of the construction of socialism in the former USSR, Korean youth transitioned through the first adaptation period which was difficult in all respects, but in the process acquired valuable interethnic relationship building experience as well as education and professional training.

### **Korean Youth in the Former: Culture and Education**

The policy of the Soviet government regarding the Chinese and Korean citizens residing in Russian territory was expressed in a special letter of the People’s Commissariat of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) of Foreign Affairs. It was dated December 4, 1918 and signed by Deputy People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs L. M. Karakhan and Chief of the East Department of the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, A. Voznesenskii. This appeal to all Soviet government authorities, the VCheka (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution, Speculation, and Sabotage), and local Cheka offices, stated that most nationals of the “countries of the East” in Russia truly supported the Soviet government in its efforts to involve Asian democratic forces in the

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9. See for example, *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda* (The Pacific Ocean Star), February 6, 1929; January 29, 1930; April 15, 1931; May 25, 1932; August 8, 1932.



common battle against imperialism. Therefore, all necessary conditions should be created for the residence of these foreign nationals on Russian territory. The letter also highlighted the “need to be extremely cautious with the numerous citizens of Eastern countries” (Son 2013b).

Thus, Koreans, especially young Koreans, received every support available from the new Soviet government. The Soviet decrees on land, workers’ insurance, the eight-hour working day, and equality of rights for all citizens, were applied also to Korean peasants and workers. This could not but motivate Korean youth to take active part in the battle for the establishment of Soviet power in the Russian Far East.

The Soviet authorities defined their own priorities in terms of interethnic relations: the ideology of the Soviet authorities was based upon a class-oriented view of international culture that took precedence over ethno-national culture. In the 1920s and 1930s, the major direction of economic development advocated by the Soviet state, such as industrialization, collectivization, and cultural revolution, encouraged people to move away from their traditional ethnic values and towards the larger integrated category of the “Soviet people.”

During this time, every public, political, and cultural activity of the Soviet population was placed under the control of state authorities. Various forms of public activity, which had evolved as displays of ethno-national self-expression, rather than as “top down” organization, were rejected by the authorities and labeled as “bourgeois nationalist.” A serious concern for the young Soviet government was uncontrolled consolidation of ethnic groups and the spread within these groups of any ideology that differed from the official one.

The main objective of Soviet authorities for building a new society and raising up “new Soviet citizens” was the elimination of illiteracy, including among ethno-national minorities. Archival documents from this period help us understand the widespread and concentrated activities carried out to by the Soviet state overcome the cultural backwardness of the “small-numbered” peoples living on the peripheries of the state.

The Local Public Education Agencies and the Korean sections of the provincial committees of the AUCP(b) (All-Union Communist Party [Bolsheviks]) took over leadership of the cultural and educational activities among Koreans of the Soviet Far East. To ensure successful control over

the activities of Korean schools, in April 1923, the Governorate Board of Education appointed the governorate commissioner in charge of the affairs of Korean schools in the Primor'e Governorate.

At the beginning of July 1923, there were 224 Korean schools with 12,822 pupils in the Primor'e Governorate, including 40 state schools (with a total of 2,334 students) and 184 ethno-national Korean schools (with 10,488 students) that operated with funds provided by parents (Park 1995, 135–136). Out of all these Korean schools, only four taught in Russian. The rest taught either exclusively in Korean (basically, in the districts populated primarily by Koreans who were not Russian subjects) or else as they taught Russian as a separate school subject. However, by the mid-1920s it became clear that Korean school graduates did not meet the relevant standard demanded by the Russian-speaking environment. Therefore, Russian language was introduced in the majority of schools (Park 1995, 135–136).

In 1924, the Primor'e Province Committee of the RCP(b) (Russian Communist Party [Bolsheviks]) determined the main thrust of cultural activity with regard to Koreans: schooling, publishing of newspapers, books, and textbooks organizing of clubs and opening of theaters, political education, abolition of illiteracy, and antireligious propaganda. A target was set to make the Korean schools fully state-owned (at the time, only 38 percent of students were taught in state schools) (Park 1995, 135–136).

Korean schools encountered great challenges, including a lack of schools, teachers, and textbooks. Nevertheless, the authorities and local Korean residents undertook many efforts to improve the education system. Ian Gamarnik, the chairman of the Far East Revolutionary Committee, pointed out the following in his report to the Department of Nationalities at the Presidium of VTsIK (All-Russian Central Executive Committee): “The academic year 1924–1925 has been the first year of planned work devoted to the elimination of illiteracy in the Far East. Despite the difficult conditions of working with national minorities, there have nonetheless been improvements: 6,350 Koreans, 75 Chinese, 16 Tatars and 294 natives (250 Buryats and 44 Goldi and Gilyaks) have been taught to read and write.”<sup>10</sup>

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10. GARF (1925), f. 1235, finding aid 120, case 61, list 2, 3, 9.

In 1925–1926, the Far East Political and Educational Department planned to teach reading and writing to 8,055 illiterate Koreans, 560 Chinese, 80 Tatars and 380 natives (Gilyaks, Oroqens, Goldi, and Buryats) and 662 semiliterate Koreans and 30 semiliterate Buryats, for a total of 9,767 people, corresponding to 11 percent of the total number of illiterate and semiliterate people in the Soviet Far East.<sup>11</sup>

Textbooks on the Korean language published in the Far East region in these years are kept in the Russian State Library. The first three textbooks (which list no author) for teaching Korean language to the Korean population were published between 1924 and 1926, each with a print run of 3000. In 1931, O Seong-muk and Yi Gwan compiled a textbook for Korean primary schools (there were three-stage schools in Russia at that time) in an edition of 15,000 copies. Prominent figures of the March 1st Movement activists like O Jang-hwan, Gye Bong-u, O Seong-muk, Yi Gwan and others actively participated in the compilation of different levels of textbooks for both adults and children. A sort of journal-cum-textbook in Korean language for children was issued in 1931–1932.

**Table 1.** Korean-language Textbooks Published in the Former USSR (1924–1935)

Author	Publication year	Title and level	Place of publication	No. of copies
	1924	- <i>Krasnoye ditia</i> (Red Child) -First level for reading; ABC book	Vladivostok	3,000
	1925	- <i>Krasnoye ditia</i> (Red Child) -Second level for reading	Vladivostok	3,000
	1926	- <i>Krasnoye ditia</i> (Red Child) -Third level for reading.	Vladivostok	3,000
O Jang-hwan (O Chan Khvan)	1930	- <i>Koreiskaya grammatika</i> (Korean Grammar)	Khabarovsk	1,500

11. GARF (1925), f. 1235, finding aid 120, case 61, list 2, 3, 9.

Author	Publication year	Title and level	Place of publication	No. of copies
	1934	- <i>Uchebnik koreiskogo yazyka</i> (Textbook of Korean Language) -For the fifth year of middle school	Moscow – Khabarovsk	3,500
	1935	- <i>Uchebnik koreiskogo yazyka</i> (Textbook of Korean Language) -For sixth and seventh grades of middle school; second part; grammar (syntax)	Moscow – Khabarovsk	6,125
Nee Pavel (Ni Pavel), O Sang-il (O San Ir), and O Jang-hwan (O Chan Khvan)		- <i>Novyi bukvar' dlya vzroslykh</i> (New ABC Primer for Adults)	Khabarovsk	
O Seong-muk (O Sen Muk) and Yi Gwan (Li Gvan)	1931	- <i>Stroiteli kplkhov. Bukvar' dlya koreiskikh shkol pervoi stupeni DVK</i> (Builders of the Kolkhoz) -ABC primer for First Level of Korean Schools in the Far East Region	Khabarovsk	15,000
O Seong-muk (O Sen Muk)	1932	- <i>Udarnik. Bukvar' dlya vzroslykh</i> (Shock Worker) -ABC primer for adults (in Korean language)	Moscow – Khabarovsk	35,000
	1933	- <i>Bukvar' na koreiskom yazyke dlya detei</i> -ABC primer in Korean language for children	Vladivostok	
	1934	- <i>Grammatika koreiskogo yazyka. Dlya srednei shkoly. Sed'moi god obucheniya uchebnik dlya sed'mogo klassa</i> -Grammar of the Korean Language; textbook for seventh grade of middle school	Moscow – Khabarovsk	4,000
Keo Bong-u (Ge Bon U)	1931	- <i>Rabochaya kniga po koreiskomu yazyku. Chast' 1. Dlya pervogo goda obucheniya ShKM</i> -Workbook in the Korean language, part 1; for the first year of study at Korean youth schools	Khabarovsk	3,100
	1931	- <i>Rabochaya kniga po koreiskomu yazyku. Chast' 1. Dlya pervogo goda obucheniya ShKM</i> -Workbook in the Korean language, part 1; for the second year of study at Korean youth schools	Vladivostok	3,000

Author	Publication year	Title and level	Place of publication	No. of copies
	1932	- <i>Rabochaya kniga po koreiskomu yazyku. Chast' 2. Dlya pervogo goda obucheniya ShKM</i> -Workbook in the Korean language, part 2; for the second year of study at Korean youth schools	Khabarovsk	7,000
Journal in Korean language for children	1931	- <i>Yunyye stroiteli</i> (Young Builders), no. 1	Khabarovsk	3,000
Journal in Korean language for children	1931	- <i>Yunyye stroiteli</i> (Young Builders), no. 3	Khabarovsk	6,000
Journal textbook for third year	1932	- <i>Yunyye boitsy</i> (Young Fighters), no. 1	Khabarovsk	6,000

Source: The Eastern Division of the Russian State Library.

Archival evidence shows the educational aspirations of all Koreans in the former USSR. This ethnic trait of Koreans made them special compared with other ethnic groups in the former USSR and made it possible to quickly arrange and establish two Korean training colleges and a teacher training institute.

Pedagogical training was conducted at the Nikol'sk-Ussuriisk Teacher Training College in the Korean faculty, and starting from 1927 at the new Nikol'sk-Ussuriisk Korean Teacher Training College. In 1930, a pedagogical college was opened in Pošet, and in 1931 the Korean Teacher Training Institute was inaugurated in Vladivostok. In the 1933–1934 academic year, 287 primary, 40 junior secondary, and 2 full secondary schools for Koreans were operating in the Primor'e and Ussuriisk regions, with a total of 26,698 students (Park and Bugai 2004).

During the period of the first five-year plan (1927–1932), 420 teachers graduated from the Korean Teacher Training College in Nikol'sk-Ussuriisk. While just 8 Koreans were studying in higher educational institutions in the 1924–1925 academic year, in 1935 the Vladivostok Korean Teacher Training Institute awarded diplomas to its first 17 Korean graduates. In 1936, there were 16 graduates, including 8 teachers of physics and mathematics. By 1937, the teacher training institute could already boast 87 graduates, including 29 teachers of history, 42 teachers of physics and mathematics,

and 16 teachers of *prirrodovedenie* (nature studies).

The difficult political and economic conditions combined with the distortion of national policy have led to collectivization, sabotage, and peasant uprisings in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This situation has led to sharp interethnic hostilities and weakened the position of Soviet authorities. Professional propaganda personnel were required to support Soviet power. At this stage, the attention of the communist party was refocused on the preparation of party work organizers and soviet work organizers. The transition to enormous (total) control was realizing.

One point worth stressing is that a large-scale Party purge<sup>12</sup> was undertaken at the beginning of the 1930s, when the first-generation of Soviet communists were expelled from the Party. Those who took an active part in the establishment of Soviet power were no longer welcome and oppressed. Their place was taken by young people fanatically devoted to the Communist Party of the former USSR and the Young Communist League.

Throughout the territory of the former USSR, there were still to be found some population groups who did not accept Soviet rule and its new paradigms. To combat this opposition, a young generation of “Soviet propagandists” was brought up in Party schools. In the Far East, Korean youth were at the forefront of this pro-Soviet effort, actively joining the ranks of the Young Communist League and AUCP(b) (All-Union Communist Party [Bolsheviks]).

By 1934, 388 Koreans had graduated from Soviet Party schools. The graduates from these schools were sent to Party cells in enterprises, agricultural and fishery collective farms (*kolkhozes*), and district Party boards as propagandists, as well as to machinery and tractor stations, political departments on state farms (*sovkhoses*), and cultural and educational institutions. All these actions contributed to the consolidation

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12. Party purges involved inspections of documents of Communist Party members, candidates for the AUCP(b), security screenings of Komsomol members, and the “confirmation of loyalty” to the Party and Komsomol. In other words, if a person was deemed unreliable, then he or she was expelled from the Party, demoted, or fired from his or her position. These purges frequently expelled faithful and honest people. Even anonymous information could cause a person to be screened or monitored out of suspicion of anti-Soviet behavior.

of Party ideology at the local level (Son 2013b).

During my research, I discovered that in the period from 1931 to 1937, over 400 Koreans were assigned as instructors to provincial and district committees of the Communist Party in accordance with decisions by the Board of the Regional Committee and provincial-level committees of the AUCP(b), in the Khabarovskii, Amurskii, Ussuriiskii, Zeiskii, Kamchatskii, Nizhne-Amurskii, Jewish, and Sakhalin provinces.<sup>13</sup>

The Korean graduates between 1931 and 1937 of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East, 352 in number, were distributed between various Party and Soviet authorities. In the same period, 14 Koreans were assigned to positions as People's Court judges<sup>14</sup> and 4 to positions as prosecutors and deputy prosecutors<sup>15</sup> in areas densely inhabited by Koreans, 80 as chairmen/presidents of rural councils (*selsovets*) and collective farms (*kolkhozes*), 51 as managers of machinery and tractor stations, and 49 as school principals, teachers, and people in charge of cultural and educational activities. Indeed, Koreans were active participants in all the Party-sponsored activities of the Far East region. (see table 2).

Table 2 shows how in the latter half of the 1930s, Korean youth gained more influence over the political and public sphere of the Far East region and held relatively stable positions in the Party, state, industrial, and educational sectors.

Regarding cultural development, it is remarkable that during this period (up to August 1937) Korean language and Korean literature were undergoing a flourishing period of development. This is in contrast to colonial Korea, where Japanese culture and language were foisted upon Koreans. For Koreans

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13. Prepared based on archived documents. RGASPI (1930–1937), f. 17, finding aid 21, case 5419–5431, case 5459–5471, case 5467–5486, case 5513–5528, case 3638–3668, case 5563–5565, case 5569–5572, case 5576–5588, case 5595–5604, case 1174–1207, case 5545–5553, case 5612–5628.

14. RGASPI (1930–1937), f. 17, finding aid 21, case 5419–5431, case 5459–5471, case 5467–5486, case 5513–5528, case 3638–3668, case 5563–5565, case 5569–5572, case 5576–5588, case 5595–5604, case 1174–1207, case 5545–5553, case 5612–5628.

15. RGASPI (1930–1937), f. 17, finding aid 21, case 5419–5431, case 5459–5471, case 5467–5486, case 5513–5528, case 3638–3668, case 5563–5565, case 5569–5572, case 5576–5588, case 5595–5604, case 1174–1207, case 5545–5553, case 5612–5628.

Table 2. Koreans Assigned to Positions in the Public Sphere (1935–1937)

Far East region districts (province-level committees of the Communist Party)	Instructors in provincial and district committees of the Communist Party	People's Court judges (since 1931)	Prosecutors and assistant prosecutors (1931)	School principals, officers in charge of cultural / education activities and teachers	Presidents of collective farms and district executive committees	Managers of machinery and tractor stations	Students of KUTV and propagandists
Primorskii	120	5 (since 1931)	3 (1931)	17	13	27	139
Khabarovskii	16			5	7	3	3
Amurskii	11				5	2	4
Ussuriyskii	129	6	1	16	34	14	200
Zetskii	2				1		
Kamchatskii	3					1	
Nizhne-Amurskii	4	1		1		1	
Jewish	21			6	12	2	1
Sakhalin	18			2	8	1	3
Total	341	14	4	49	80	51	352

Source: RGASPI (1935–1937), f. 17, finding aid 21, case 5419–5431, case 5459–5471, case 5467–5486, case 5513–5528, case 3638–3668, case 5563–5565, case 5569–5572, case 5576–5588, case 5595–5604, case 1174–1207, case 5545–5553, case 5612–5628.



in the Soviet Far East, new opportunities for artistic growth were given to writers and poets of the new generation like Jo Gi-cheon, Yeon Seong-yong, Chae Yeong, Kim Chun, Yi Gil-su, Tae Jang-chun, Jeong Khvala, and Kye Bong-u.

The poets Jo Ho-rim and Jo Myeong-hui were widely popular. Starting from 1934, Jo Ho-rim headed the Far Eastern Regional Union of Writers. Jo Myeong-hui can be called a pioneer of Soviet Korean literature. In 1925, he was one of the active organizers of KAPF (Korea Artista Proleta Federacio), the proletarian art federation in Korea. In 1929, escaping from persecution by the Japanese government, he fled to the Soviet Union where he continued his literary activities.

In 1935, the first compendium of Korean literary works to be published in the former USSR appeared in Khabarovsk under the title *Nodongja-ui gohyang* (The Motherland of Toilers). It contained the article by Kim Vasili, “What Young Writers Learn from Maksim Gor’kii,” poems by Jo Ho-rim, Jo Dong-gyu, O Seong-muk, Khan Anatolii, Jeong Dong-hyeok, Kim In-seop, Tae Jang-chun, Kang Ju-ryeok, Yu Il-ryeon, Jo Myeong-hui and others, as well as songs and other works by Soviet Korean authors.

In September 1932, a small-scale Korean theater was created in Vladivostok. It was intended to function as an agitator and propaganda forum the “new life and new international society in the Far East” to its ethno-national audience. The theater was operated for a little over six months, but as a result of its unskilled management, was closed down and then re-opened in July 1933. The chief theater director was Jo Gil-jun and the chief artistic director Ban Il-ju. The stage company was composed of 18 people—15 actors and 3 actresses, among whom were 5 members of the Komsomol, 2 AUCP(b) members, and 1 applicant to the AUCP(b). During the six-month period during which the theater operated, they put on 18 performances in the new housing areas and collective farms (*kolkhozes*) of the Pos’et district, of which 11 were free of charge (Son 2013b, 223-225). It is notable that alongside proletarian culture, the theater also developed ethno-national dramatic art.

The sovietization of Koreans and the building of a new Soviet life could not but bring changes to the musical culture of Koreans as well. Revolutionary

marches and songs became a source of discord within the music environment. A famous singer of Korean national songs, Yeon Seong-i, advocated for the performance of Korean traditional melodies, trying to maintain ethnolocal musical color. This approach was rejected by his avid opponent, the revolutionary poet Jo Myeong-hui (Kim 2007, 44). Jo criticized Korean traditional music, considering it as backward-looking and unable to lead toward progress. With increasing frequency, melodies were changed, though traditional lyrics remained the same. The popular singer Yi Ham-deok was one of the chief adapters of old Korean songs to the Soviet style, and these melodies are still alive among Russian Koreans today (Kim 2007, 45).

During this transitional period, traditional Korean songs were sung by the older generation of Koreans. However, these were gradually forced out as anti-Soviet. During the process of the Korean population's assimilation to Russian culture and the sovietization of the region, the melodies of songs were changed. Soviet and Korean melodies mingled in the new Korean songs in another example of new connections between the two cultures.

Little is known about the activities of Korean artists in this period. The Korean Far Eastern newspaper *Seonbong* (Vanguard) reported that in May 1936 the first one artist's exhibition in the Soviet Far East was held, and many Korean artists, such as Byeon Bo-ryeon, Yi Eung-ho, and Kim Grigorii, attended (*Seonbong*, June 12, 1936). This same newspaper had earlier published articles in Korean on the contemporary artists Aleksandr Baek, Kim Gi-seon, and Pavel Jeong (*Seonbong*, April 2, 1936).

The mass media played an important role in the building of a new society in the Russian Far East. On March 1, 1923, the Korean-language newspaper *Seonbong* was first published in Vladivostok. It served as the organ of the Korean section of the Primor'e Governorate Board of the RCP(b). The same year in May, *Sin saenghwal* (New Life) magazine was relaunched in the Soviet Far East, having been previously published in Korea under the same title before it was banned by the Japanese colonial authorities. The magazine published current news about domestic life in Korea and articles about the national liberation movement. Apart from this, other Korean-language publications in the Soviet Far East included *Munhwa* (Culture), *Nodongja* (The Worker), *Nonong sinbo* (The Worker and Peasant Newspaper), and

*Donga gongsang sinmun* (Eastern Commune News).

The works of all regional publishing houses were strictly censored by political editors. The staff of Krailit (Regional Literary Publishing House) prepared detailed overviews of the editions they were in charge of, focusing on the deviation of one article (or literary work) or another from common Party policy. The main tool of political education for Koreans in the Far Eastern region was *Seonbong*. Yi Yeon-jung, a Krailit employee, wrote in one of his overviews about the expectations for this newspaper: “The newspaper should be a political body of the Regional Party Board . . . a collective agitator, propagandist and organizer of Korean workers of the region” (*Seonbong*, April 2, 1936).

The Soviets took all necessary measures to eradicate traditional customs and practices among Koreans. Korean festivals were used as vehicles for political and antireligious propaganda. Traditional Korean festivals like Seollal (Lunar New Year’s Day), Dano (Celebration of Spring and Farming), and Hansik (Start of Farming Season) were banned; only family-related celebrations remained, like the birth of a child, weddings, 60th anniversaries (*hwan-gap*), and funerals. All minorities in Russia were in the same situation.

Among the numerous archival documents I have examined, the following two decisions of the Bureau of the Primor’e Province Board of the AUCP(b) merit special attention: the decision on the work of the Korean Teacher Training Institute dated December 15, 1934<sup>16</sup> and the decision on the Korean and Chinese theaters<sup>17</sup> dated September 25, 1935.<sup>18</sup> Both documents state the special role and significance of the arrangement and describe Soviet leadership interest in further development of education and cultural centers in the Far Eastern region for Koreans and Chinese. Here the point of issue is that in order to stabilize the international situation in the Far East, the Soviet leadership intended to demonstrate to Japan that the Koreans in the Soviet Union lived in safety, actively participating in the social, economic, and cultural life of the country. On the other hand, the

16. RGASPI (1934), fund 17, inventory 21, case 3638, p. 232.

17. In the Soviet Far East during the 1920s and 1930s, the Chinese and the Koreans had one common name: Easterners [Vostochniki]. In the documents, regulations, and decrees they were designated as the “Chinese and the Koreans” or the “Easterners.”

18. RGASPI (1934), fund 17, inventory 21, case 3640, p. 170.

Soviet leadership purposefully conducted propaganda for the export of the proletarian revolution to neighboring countries.

Within the system of public education and cultural development of Korean workers in the Far Eastern Region, the Far Eastern Korean Teacher Training Institute was created in 1931 and played a leading role. The main purpose behind creating the institute was “to foster competent cultural teaching staffs with basic knowledge of contemporary science and Marxist-Leninist theory for Korean secondary schools of the Far Eastern Region.”<sup>19</sup>

In the 1930s, it turned out that 95 percent of the teaching staff in Korean secondary schools had received only a secondary or incomplete higher education. Thus, the task was set for the institute to ensure the accelerated preparation of qualified teachers. Thus, the establishment of two Korean teacher training colleges in the Far East and the Korean Teacher Training Institute in Vladivostok is proof not only of the high intellectual level of the Korean population and their great eagerness for educational studies, but also the recognition of this reality by the state. These educational institutions were organized and financed by the state. For example, the Bureau of the Far Eastern Province Board of the AUCP(b), aiming at further development of Korean educational institutions, decided to give 500,000 rubles for the construction of a dormitory for 480 students in 1935–1936 and purchase of the necessary equipment for rooms and laboratories.<sup>20</sup>

Another important decisions made by the aforementioned bureau was to create an in-house printing office, which resulted in the expansion of translation and publication activities as well as the translation of textbooks and study books into Korean.

The Korean theater—the first theater in the Soviet Far East—acquired the status of particular all-Union (across the former USSR) importance. One report on this Korean theater notes that during the three years of its existence, it achieved significant results<sup>21</sup> It created new plays reflecting the lives and battles of Korean workers for the independence of Korea: *Tyan-*

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19. RGASPI (1934), fund 17, inventory 21, case 3638, p. 232.

20. RGASPI (1934), fund 17, inventory 21, case 3638, p. 232.

21. RGASPI (1934), fund 17, inventory 21, case 3638, p. 232.

*Fen-Donskii Fakel* (The Torch of Tien-Feng-Dong), *Severo-Vostochnaya magistral'* (The North-Eastern Highway), *Tyan Khakmok* (Jang Hangmok), and *Chunkhyandzhon* (The Tale of Chunhyang). The following performances about life in the Russian Far East and the participation of Korean workers in the construction of socialism in the Far Eastern region were also staged: *Klyuch* (The Key), *Mezha* (The Land Boundary), and *Shkiper She Sansebi* (Skipper Seo Sang-seop). The Korean theater enjoyed great popularity and gave performances in five different districts of the Far Eastern Region in 1934. The performances were attended by 47,500 people, with 24,000 in the first six months of 1935.<sup>22</sup>

Koreans were also noted for their special attitude toward military service. Over 15,000 Koreans, organized into 49 partisan units, including 4 regiments under the operational control of the Soviet Fifth People's Revolutionary Army, participated in the battle for the liberation of the Russian Far East from foreign invaders and for the establishment of Soviet control. During these years, a nucleus of politically and militarily trained Korean internationalist revolutionaries was formed.

Young Koreans were drafted into the Soviet Red Army up until the autumn of 1937; they fulfilled their military duty with dignity, reinforcing the defense capacity of the state and guarding state borders. During the conflict over the KVZhD (Chinese Eastern Railway), the deputy chief of staff of Rifle Regiment 278, Captain Grigorii Terentevich Pak, was awarded the Order of Wartime Red Banner. On May 17, 1937, the Executive Committee of the Far Eastern Region, in line with instructions from the presidium of the former USSR Central Executive Committee (TsIK), awarded Red Stars to six commanders including one Korean Commander of the Rifle Company Kim Seon-guk and political education officers of the Special Red Banner Far Eastern Army for their military, political, and technical accomplishments. Among the awardees was Commander of the Rifle Company, Kim Sun-guk (*Tikhookeanskaia zvezda*, May 24, 1935).

Young Koreans took an active part in the establishment of Soviet power in the Russian Far East and the liberation of the region from foreign

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22. RGASPI (1935), fund 17, inventory 21, case 3640, list 170.

occupiers. After the establishment of Soviet power, Korean communists and Komsomol members, together with Russian communists and Komsomol members, contributed to the sovietization of the region, assuming key positions in all state governments at the local level.

### Political Repression of Young Koreans

The two-faced policy of Soviet authorities practiced in the 1920s and 1930s also applied to Soviet Koreans. In other words, a so-called carrot and stick approach was used. On the one hand, there was tolerance for day-to-day activities of Koreans, and they were provided with jobs and everything they needed to begin a new life. On the other hand, heavy-handed control and suspicion of being “Japanese spies” dogged Koreans throughout the entire Stalinist period.

The Korean population suffered heavy losses during the mass-scale Stalinist purges in the former USSR in the 1930s.<sup>23</sup> All those sentenced were punished differently under article 58 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR (counter-revolutionary crimes). According to the nature of the crimes, Koreans were preventively convicted on the following articles of the

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23. The social composition of arrested Koreans was as follows: 1,311 workers, including 954 industrial and transport workers and 357 seasonal, farm, and miscellaneous workers; 419 peasants; 1,042 *kolkhoz* members; 47 self-employed farmers; 484 intellectuals, including 140 engineers and technicians, 277 professors from higher educational institutions and higher technical qualification institutions, scientists, and school teachers; 31 people from artistic professions (actors, writers, artists, and musicians); 36 doctors and medium-grade medical personnel; 206 senior executives from various institutions and factories; 425 other employees; 24 agriculturists, zoo technicians, veterinarians, and other rural professionals; 61 chairmen of collective farms (*kolkhoz*); 159 employees of district and rural institutions and enterprises; 292 higher and secondary school students; 29 members of the military; 94 officers; 31 noncommissioned officers, rank, and file soldiers; 26 operational staff from the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) and the militia; 193 other workers; 11 elderly and disabled; 40 housekeepers; 5 religious workers; 11 deportees and reconvicted; 297 destitute individuals (with no visible means of support like criminals or beggars); 227 defectors from cordon, or military prisoners; and 957 for whom no information is available (Son 2013b, 260–261).

Criminal Code of the RSFSR: espionage in favor of Japan (art. 58, para. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, art. 193, para. 4 of the Criminal Code); diversions (art. 58, para. 9 of the Criminal Code); terror (art. 58, para. 8 of the Criminal Code); counter-revolutionary agitation (art. 58, para. 10, 11, art. 59, para. 7 of the Criminal Code) as well as all possible variations of this article and its paragraphs.

**Table 3.** Judicial Judgments for Soviet Koreans  
Convicted of Political Crimes (1924–1953)

Measures of Punishment	Convicted
Ultimate sanction of the law (execution by firing squad)	3,289
Corrective labor camp (CLC) up to 25 years	49
CLC up to 20 years	28
CLC up to 15 years	31
CLC up to 10 years	1,034
CLC up to 5 years	429
CLC up to 3 years	301
Exile and deportation	133
Other (died during investigation; under investigation for a year or more, then released)	165
No information on the decision of judicial authorities	525
Released (after 2 to 6 months under investigation)	401
Total	6,385

Source: Son (2013b).

The age data of those convicted is as follows: under 18, 44 people; between 18 and 25, 850 people; between 26 and 35, 1,910 people; between 36 and 60, 3,030 people; over 60, 284 people; and no age information, 267 people.

In total, 2,804 Koreans under 35 years of age were politically repressed under the accusation of espionage in favor of Japan. The arrested Koreans included students, teachers, scientists, engineers, doctors, artists, peasants, laborers, hairdressers, and photographers. They have since been rehabilitated based on the law of the Russian Federation adopted in 1991 on rehabilitation of the victims of political repressions.

## Conclusion

In the 1920s and 1930s, the adaptation of young Koreans into the new Soviet society went more smoothly than it had with the previous generation of Koreans. The Korean youth fully and completely trusted the Soviets, with full consciousness of the Soviet Union as their motherland. By the beginning of the 1930s, a new generation had grown up, fanatically devoted to the ideas of communism. In particular, youth were at the forefront of Soviet construction in the Far East, included in the best workers called “shock workers,” and winners of the Stakhanovite movement rewarded with prestigious government awards. Despite the Stalinist double-edged policy of support and political repressions the various ethnicities of the new Soviet experiment, including forced resettlers and Soviet Koreans, believed in the bright future of socialism.

This was in contrast to the older generation of Russian Koreans, who still remembered the battle against Japan and did not abandon hope for the early liberation of Korea from Japanese colonialism. The conditions of life and work in Korea continued to suffer under the heel of Japanese imperialism. Koreans living in Korea under Japanese rule had no rights, were starved, and remained a poor accessory to the colonial society.

In the Soviet Union, new conditions for the formation and acquisition of an occupational specialty had been created. Korean youth had opportunities to obtain free education, learn a profession, and pursue career growth. The high adaptability of young Koreans allowed for an increase in communication activity and free manifestation of talents and capacities in the economic and cultural sectors. Until 1937, Korean youth actively participated in the political and public life of the Soviet Far East (table 2), and took an active role in the social, economic, and cultural development of the region (Son 2013b, 258–260). By this time, the Koreans had studied and worked in the industrial cities of the former USSR, including Moscow, Leningrad (Saint-Petersburg), Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg), Irkutsk, Novosibirsk, Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Rostov, and Kazan’ (Son 2013b, 258–260).

The inner world of young Koreans was formed under the impact of two national cultures, the one Russian and the other Korean, in constant



communication and interconnection with the cultures of other ethnic groups inhabiting the Soviet Union. The culture of Koreans in the Russian Far East was integrated as a distinct element into the cultural garland of the Soviet multi-ethnic state.

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