

**False Narratives and the Reality of History: The Deportation of Soviet
Koreans in 1937**

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Researching Internal Displacement

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Abstract

The paper highlights the relatively unknown deportation of Soviet Koreans, the first of several state deportations based on ethnicity carried out by the Soviet Union. The forced displacement, mainly to Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union, was highly classified during Soviet times, leading to misunderstandings and subsequent misrepresentations of the event by Western scholars and the creation of multiple inaccurate narratives, including that of ethnic cleansing. By conducting an interdisciplinary study, the paper analyses widespread misconceptions about the deportation of the Soviet Koreans and provides objective data on the issue and its long-lasting effects on those Soviet Koreans who survived deportation and their descendants.

Keywords

Soviet Koreans, USSR, Deportation, Exile, Displacement

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1. Introduction

Soviet Koreans were the first among the Peoples of the USSR to experience deportation, followed by Germans, Kurds, Crimean Tatars, Poles, Chechens, and others forcibly deported on ethnic grounds. In English-language historiography, the concept of “ethnic cleansing” is often used in relation to Joseph Stalin’s policy of mass and forced deportations of Soviet Peoples, which is essentially not correct. Unlike “ethnic cleansing,” which is related to the term “genocide”, as shown by events after the collapse of Yugoslavia, the deportations of the Stalin regime had different goals. The term “deportation” was used in Russian-language discourse on Stalin’s national policy and Soviet history with the connotation of forced eviction of people on ethnic grounds to other regions of the Soviet Union for political and economic goals ostensibly related to “security”.

Based on an analysis of an integrated corpus of sources and historiographical scholarly publications, this article presents the first interdisciplinary study of the 1937 deportation of Koreans, examining the validity of established false stereotypes about this key topic in the history of Soviet Koreans. It provides a critical analysis of widespread mythologized clichés and misconceptions about deportation and attempts to reconstruct and interpret the objective historical reality.



Route of the deportation of Koreans in the Soviet Union in 1937. [Wikimedia Commons](#)

2. Historiography of the Korean deportation

The 1937 deportation of Soviet Koreans from the Far East was the first in a series of mass forced migrations based on ethnicity in Soviet history. Consequently, it attracted the particular attention of researchers from various countries and was widely covered in scholarly works, literature, and video documentaries. During the Soviet era, it was considered a taboo topic of research, and most archival documents were classified as top secret. With the beginning of [Mikhail Gorbachev](#)'s *perestroika*, followed by [Boris Yeltsin](#)'s rule, a wave of publications emerged on the history of ethnic deportations, including Soviet Koreans. The results of these publications require comprehension of key aspects of the topic, including identification of prominent researchers who made important contributions to the topic as well as determination of historiographical evolution of discourse, which consists of four main periods: 1) the prohibition of research and full suppression of the topic of “deportation”; 2) the [Khrushchev Thaw](#) and attempts to discuss forced deportation on ethnic grounds; 3) Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the beginning of critical study; and 4) systematic and interdisciplinary analysis.

In the first stage, “prohibition and silencing”, research on Stalin's deportation policy was prioritized by Western scholars. In the mid-1950s, the first works appeared in the West. For instance, in his book *The Peoples of the Soviet Far East*, Walter Kolarz was among the first to highlight the domestic and foreign policy causes and goals of the deportation of Soviet Koreans from the Far East (Kolarz, 1954). Another example is Robert Conquest's monograph *The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities*, which became one of the first substantial works specifically devoted to ethnic deportations and the first to introduce a comprehensive description of the practice of Soviet “ethnic cleansing”. The author emphasizes that the forced deportations of all ten Peoples and ethnic minorities he studied caused demographic and social damage and psychological trauma; destroyed traditional settlement structures; undermined trust in the state; and created preconditions for interethnic conflicts in subsequent decades.

Despite the limited information source base (closed Soviet archives), Conquest's book had a significant influence on subsequent historiography and became a starting point for further research on deportation policy (Conquest, 1960). In the 1960s, foreign researchers published a series of specialized articles and books on the history and present-day situation of the *Koryo Saram* (고려사람, Koreans of the former USSR). Thus, in his article *The Korean Minority in the Soviet Union*, John J. Stephan provided a general overview, in chronological sequence, of the Koreans of Russia, little known to Western audiences, and of the Soviet Union, including the 1937 deportation (Stephan, 1970).

In the 1980s, scholars of South Korean descent from Western countries became active in studying the past and present of the *Koryo Saram*. Among the many South Korean historiographies, the monograph by Kho Songmoo, *Koreans in Soviet Central Asia*, published in English in 1987, stands out and has attracted the most attention from researchers worldwide. It covers a wide range of topics: voluntary resettlement of Koreans to Russia and deportation to Kazakhstan and Central Asia; contemporary ethnocultural life of *Koryo Saram*; rice cultivation in Korean collective and state farms; language and speech; and Korean theatre and literature.

It should be noted that during the Soviet period, many books and articles were published on the history of Soviet Koreans. However, the word “deportation” was never used by anyone, and the Koreans in such publications either allegedly “moved to Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan” themselves, or suddenly found themselves thousands of kilometers from the Far East without any explanation.

The second, very brief stage, coinciding with the Khrushchev Thaw, can be called “dissident, literary,” since after [Alexander Solzhenitsyn](#) mentioned in his work, which became known throughout the world, *The Gulag Archipelago*: the deportation of Koreans as a “mass ethnic flow” and a “rehearsal for large-scale deportations of the early 1940s.” This was subsequently noted in the works of other Soviet dissidents, including [Andrei Sakharov](#), [Andrei Amalrik](#), [Yuri Orlov](#), [Valery Chalidze](#), and others.

The third phase, the declassification of archival collections and critical study, was marked by a rapid expansion of the non-academic discourse on the deportation of Soviet Koreans. Numerous publications by non-professional authors appeared in newspapers, magazines, and online sites. However, the “snowball” effect on academic research on the deportation of Koreans failed to materialize.

The declassification of archival documents was not a one-time event, but rather a lengthy, multi-stage, and controversial process. Until 1989, the deportation of Soviet Koreans was not officially recognized by the USSR government or the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The [NKVD](#) and [Council of People’s Commissars](#) documents were classified as “Top Secret”, “Secret”, and “Not Subject to Disclosure”. A new 1991 law of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), the largest of 15 republics of the USSR, [On the Rehabilitation of Repressed Peoples](#), was crucial in creating the legal basis for declassifying archives of ethnic deportations, officially recognizing the deportation of Koreans as a crime by the Stalinist regime. This was followed by *Presidential Decree No. 79* (1992) on the declassification of documents of repressive agencies, which became the basis for the partial opening of the collections of the central archives of the Russian Federation.

A more comprehensive declassification occurred in the 2010s, when documents from the Russian Foreign Policy Archives concerning foreign policy arguments for the deportation of Koreans were made public. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the declassification of all archival collections on political repression, including those of deported Peoples, continued from the second half of the 1980s until 2023. However, in the Russian Federation, some documents remain classified, such as intelligence files of the Korean population, lists of people “suspected of Japanese espionage”, and so on. Their publication accompanied the declassification of archival documents. Since the first half of the 1990s, important, informative collections prepared by academic institutions and individual researchers have been published, making them accessible not only to professional scholars but also to a wide range of interested individuals.

The fourth phase, the contemporary period of “systemic and interdisciplinary analysis”, is characterized by a synthesis of research methods across the social sciences and the humanities, and by a need to shift from general studies to more focused, specialized topics. Digital deportation databases, big-data analyses, and the use of AI to create infographics, electronic maps of deportation routes, resettlement of deportees, and tables that calculate human losses *en route* and at resettlement sites are emerging trends.

Paradoxically, despite the centrality of deportation in the history of Soviet Koreans, there is not a single monograph or dissertation devoted to its analysis. However, every book on Koreans in the USSR undoubtedly contains passages or chapters devoted to the 1937 deportation. Among the recognized experts on ethnic deportations, Nikolai Bugai stands out, having published dozens of books, including his collections of declassified documents and articles on the preventive deportation of Soviet Koreans from the Far East. At the same time, other renowned Russian historians have contributed to the study of key aspects of this topic. In parallel, scholars from Kazakhstan and from Uzbekistan, in their general books

and individual publications based on documents from the Central State Archives and regional archives of their countries, noted in general terms the cause-and-effect relationships of the first Soviet experience of ethnic deportation, and revealed serious problems in the resettlement and settlement of deported Koreans. Nevertheless, the scholarly works of authors from Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan became accessible only to foreign researchers capable of adequately understanding academic texts in Russian and therefore were not in demand in the West, where articles by authors such as [Michael Gelb](#), who interpreted the deportation of Koreans as an “early” example of ethnic cleansing in the USSR, became far more well-known and cited. [Terry Martin’s article](#) did not specifically focus on the deportation of Koreans. Still, it continued the development of the concept of “Soviet Ethnic Cleansing,” which came to encompass all deportations based on ethnicity.

A year after the publication of Martin’s article, Otto Pohl’s monograph, [Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949](#), was published. It summarized the research into the deportations of 15 people and ethnic minorities, with Koreans appearing chronologically first in the book. Pohl concluded that the success of the first operation commissioned by the NKVD to forcibly, aggressively, and completely deport Koreans gave rise to a pattern of deporting entire Peoples and ethnic groups suspected of disloyalty to the Soviet state.

John K. Chang’s monograph, [Burned by the Sun: Koreans of the Russian Far East](#), draws on archival documents from Russia, Japan, and the United States, as well as interviews with survivors of deportation, and has become one of the most comprehensive English-language studies on the topic. Chang argues that Koreans in the Russian Far East were viewed as a “lurking danger” during both the Tsarist and Soviet periods, reflecting “great-power” Russian chauvinism of the Tsarist regime, which still lived on in the Bolshevik Party and Soviet Government. The author believes that the Stalinist regime exercised constant control over the Korean population and organized their expulsion from the Far East not only through its security and punitive organs but also by selecting and infiltrating Korean informants into the NKVD.

From the turn of the century to the present, South Korean researchers have surpassed their colleagues in the number and volume of publications devoted to the deportation of Soviet Koreans. The main conclusions of the South Korean authors come down to the multifactorial, systematic, and utilitarian nature of the determinants of deportation. The deportation of Koreans contributed to the easing of tensions in relations with Japan; it bought time for the Soviet Union to prepare for WWII ; and it provided a pretext for fabricating high-profile cases of “enemy spies,” tightening socio-political control, and increasing the mobilization of the population. South Korean scholars began to link the deportation with metamorphoses of identity, the restoration of historical memory, the rehabilitation of psychological trauma, and its cultural reinterpretation through the prism of literature, drama, cinema, and the visual arts.

3. Early history of the deportation of Soviet Koreans

The deportation of Koreans from the Russian Far East to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is often viewed as a sudden and isolated act of Stalinist repression. In fact, it was the result of a long process rooted in imperial strategies adapted to the circumstances of particular historical periods. The Far Eastern stage of Korean history can be divided into the following main periods: 1. Early migration of Koreans to the Russian Far East and settlement of [Primorye](#). [1864-1883] 2. Japanese expansion in Korea and the crisis of Russian tsarism [1894-1917]. 3. The Bolshevik Revolution and the armed struggle to establish Soviet power, as well as the anti-Japanese resistance [1917-1927]. 4. Sovietization of the Korean population through

collectivization and the Cultural Revolution [1928-1931]. 5. Growing geopolitical tensions: The formation of the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo military-political axis and the seizure of [Manchuria](#) [1931-1936]. 6. The turning point in Soviet nationality policy, the [Great Purge \(Terror\)](#) [1936-1937], and the prelude to the deportation of Koreans.

The idea of deporting Koreans originated in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the Soviet leadership planned to resettle Koreans from the border regions of Primorye to remote areas of [Khabarovsk Krai](#). The directives of the [Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party](#) on the resettlement of Koreans, issued on August 18, 1927, were urgently transmitted to [Vladivostok](#) and Khabarovsk and became the initial instructions for preparing for the mass resettlement of Soviet Koreans from the border region. On February 25, 1930, the Politburo, chaired by Stalin, once again specifically discussed the issue of the resettlement of Soviet Koreans. Finally, on July 10, 1932, the Politburo again addressed the question in a report titled *On Koreans* and reaffirmed its directive for the mass administrative resettlement of the Korean population from the border regions of Primorye (Russian State Archive of Social and Political History).

By early 1937, Stalin's inner circle, which received reports from the Far Eastern *nomenklatura*, the privileged elite in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, had become convinced of a dangerous external and internal situation in the region. By mid-1937, the Soviet leadership's decision to deport Koreans as a necessary preventative measure to ensure state security was the result of a long and complex prelude.

4. False narratives about the causes of Korean deportation and historical reality

One of the most widespread and persistent misconceptions is that the deportation of Soviet Koreans is viewed as the result of Stalin's spontaneous decision to end foreign (primarily Japanese) espionage in the Far East. This research has resulted in the conclusion that the decision of the Communist Party and the Soviet government to deport Koreans found its logical and natural development in the joint resolution No. 1428-326ss of the Council of People's Commissars and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of August 21, 1937, *On the Deportation of the Korean Population from the Border Regions of the Far Eastern Territory*, signed by [Vyacheslav Molotov](#) and Joseph Stalin. According to the brief preamble to the resolution, the deportation of Koreans was carried out "for the purpose of preventing the penetration of Japanese espionage into the Far Eastern Territory" (Lee & Kim, 1992).

However, the fundamental reason for the deportation of Soviet Koreans, as well as all subsequent forced displacements, lies in the very essence of the totalitarian regime that had emerged in the USSR by the late 1920s, fully manifesting itself in the 1930s and 1940s. By Stalin's will and under the leadership of the party and state apparatus, punitive organs, agitation and propaganda, [socialism was built in a single country](#), according to the principle that the end justifies everything. For the first time, a socialist economic and military superpower was established, and a new type of human community - the Soviet people - was formed. Stalin's thesis on the intensification of class struggle, which he felt was directly tied to the success of socialist construction, ushered in an era of tragic mass terror. The image of an omnipresent and dangerous "enemy of the Soviet Union" was implanted in the public consciousness, and this enemy was not only individuals, social groups, or classes but also entire nations and ethnic groups. From this, followed about the necessity of terror and a merciless struggle against people hostile to socialism, the homeland, and the leader, became a logical conclusion (Aldazhumanov et al., 1998).

Among the real reasons behind the deportation of Soviet Koreans from the Far East, foreign policy played a major role. Stalin and the Soviet leadership, sensing the approach of a world war and recognizing their own unpreparedness for it, attempted to maneuver between imperialist rivals, seeking rapprochement with both Nazi Germany in the West and Imperial Japan in the East. A rapprochement with Japan required concessions to the latter, one of which was the sale of rights to the [Chinese Eastern Railway](#) in Manchuria, which was invaded by Japan in 1931, for a pittance. Another concession, according to Professor Michail Pak, could have been the complete expulsion of anti-Japanese Koreans from the Far East. “In our opinion,” he writes, “there was undoubtedly a certain agreement regarding the complete expulsion of the [Soviet] Korean population from the Far East; but the question remains whether this was formulated in any written document” (Pak, 1997). The idea of Koreans as “political hostages of a preventive action” intended to appease Japan was first voiced in Professor Vladimir Lee’s detailed commentary on Resolution No. 1428-326ss of the Council of People’s Commissars and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of August 21, 1937, but was not further developed (Lee & Kim, 1992).

The secondary reasons for the deportation of Koreans include the following: first, despite the significant degree of Sovietization of Koreans, their preponderance among the border population was alarming and inconsistent with the principle of *divide et impera*. Second, the formation of the [Jewish Autonomous Oblast](#) in 1934, according to foreign researchers, could have led to demands from the Korean population for their own administrative national autonomy. However, as is well known, the existence of the [Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic of Volga Germans](#) did not prevent the deportation decree of August 28, 1941, which resulted in approximately 3 million Germans ending up in Kazakhstan, Siberia, [Altay](#), and other regions of the country. Third, the deportation of Koreans also pursued specific political and economic goals, as resettlement to Central Asia and Kazakhstan, whose area was tens of times larger than the territory of the Far Eastern Republic, meant the fragmentation of the Korean population across settlement areas. Fourth, in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, millions of people died as a result of the crime of total [collectivization](#), and hundreds of thousands migrated to neighbouring republics and foreign countries. The resulting labour shortage was intended to be filled by settlers, including Koreans. The resettlement of the deported Koreans, primarily in the southern regions of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, was intended to develop traditional irrigated agriculture, including rice and vegetable cultivation. Fifth, the deported Koreans left behind infrastructure, vacating buildings and residential houses, which were urgently handed over to Red Army units redeployed to the Far East (Kim, 1989). However, as has already been stated, these were not the primary reasons. The fundamental reason was the totalitarian regime’s implementation of “the great-power line” in both domestic and foreign policy.

5. The false narrative of spontaneity: Deportation and its systematic organization

During Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and *glasnost*, a wave of emotional memories of deportation survivors led the public consciousness to the formation of false conclusions about the spontaneity of the forced expulsion of Soviet Koreans from the Far East, driven by Stalin’s desire to wipe out Soviet Koreans. However, as scientific research has proven, the deportation of Soviet Koreans was a planned, organized, and meticulously controlled large-scale operation by a totalitarian regime.

It is known that immediately prior to the deportation to the Far East, several waves of party purges and repressions took place, encompassing all levels of power. The functionaries were executed or imprisoned in the Gulag; some committed suicide and were replaced by a new *nomenklatura*, inexperienced in living and working with Soviet Koreans and therefore capable of carrying out the task with greater harshness.

To carry out the deportation operation, [Genrikh Lyushkov](#), head of the [Rostov](#) NKVD, was dispatched as head of the Far Eastern Directorate of the NKVD. He was summoned to the Kremlin for a confidential meeting with Stalin and received instructions to deport the Koreans ([Coox](#), 1968).

To eliminate discontent and objections to the deportation, the totalitarian regime beheaded recognized Korean leaders. The existence of a regional Korean rebel center, which allegedly plotted an armed uprising to secession of the Far Eastern Communist Party (DVK) from the USSR, was fabricated within the NKVD. Dated May 25, 1938, the extract of the case of Afanasy Kim, First Secretary of the Posyet District Committee of the Communist Party, states that he was accused of plotting a rebellion, which led to the death sentence. According to the confession of Lyushkov, who defected to Manchuria and passed classified information to the Japanese, more than 2,500 Far Eastern Koreans were arrested and repressed during the deportation ([Coox](#), 2007).

To legitimize the illegal deportation of Soviet Koreans from the Far East, a propaganda machine was in full swing on the eve of the deportation, whipping up an atmosphere of spy mania. This was kicked off by articles published in [Pravda](#) on April 16 and 23, 1937, about Japanese espionage in the Soviet Far East, which emphasized that Japanese spies were operating in Korea, China, Manchuria, and the Soviet Union, and that Chinese and Koreans residing in the mentioned territories, were used for espionage by Japan. According to statistics, 45,302 people were convicted of espionage for Japan in 1937, including 1,436 Koreans. Even though it was the topic of Korean espionage for the Japanese that was widely publicized in all Soviet newspapers. However, common sense and logical thinking suggest that the level of anti-Japanism among Koreans was highest among the population of the Far Eastern Front. Moreover, the absolute majority of Koreans – simple rural workers and labourers – had no access to state secrets.

Evidence of active, covert preparations for deportation is provided by the report, *On the Number of the Korean Population in the Border Regions of the Ussuri, Primorsky and Khabarovsk Regions (revised data)*, sent to Moscow by the command of the border and internal troops of the NKVD of the Far Eastern Communist Party, dated August 21, 1937 (Lee & Kim, 1992). The addition in parentheses, “revised data,” suggests that this is not the first report from the regional NKVD organs to Moscow on the number of Koreans, since this data was required for preliminary calculations of financial and material costs, necessary transport means, movement schedules, transportation times, etc.

Memorandum No. 516 of August 24, 1937, signed by [Nikolay Yezhov](#) and addressed to Lyushkov, is the first document revealing the NKVD’s actions in implementing the Stalin-Molotov directive (Lee & Kim, 1992). The directive, addressed to the Khabarovsk and Primorsky regional committees of the Communist Party, the regional executive committees, and the NKVD Directorate, signed by the secretary of the regional committee, [Iosif Vareikis](#), and the head of the NKVD Directorate for the Far Eastern Province, Lyushkov, basically duplicated the contents of the memorandum, but contained several additions regarding the organization of the deportation of Soviet Koreans. Firstly, this concerns the deadlines: the memorandum states, “Begin the deportation immediately and complete it by January 1, 1938,” while the directive states: “...resettlement to begin on October 25 and be completed by October 15 [1937].” Secondly, the management of the deportation of the Korean population in the districts was assigned to a [troika](#) consisting of a representative of the Far Eastern Regional Committee of the Communist Party, a representative of the Regional Executive Committee, and a representative of the NKVD Directorate. Thirdly, the procedure for assessing the property abandoned by the Koreans and settling accounts with

them was specified. Fourthly, all information on the progress of the deportation was required to be reported to the Regional Committee and the Regional Executive Committee every five days (Sim & Kim, 1998). Following the example of the regional *troikas* for the resettlement of the Korean population, district *troikas* and sectional *troikas* were formed in the areas where Koreans resided. The lower-level *troikas* bore the brunt of the operation; the district and regional *troikas* regularly held extended meetings, to which the heads of all departments were invited: the army, transportation, agriculture, finance, telegraph and postal services, public catering, healthcare, culture, education, etc. However, not a single representative of Korean nationality was invited among them (Sim & Kim, 1998).

The plan for deporting Koreans from the Far Eastern Territory established “three stages,” with the first stage already specified in the Stalin-Molotov decree of August 21, 1937: “The eviction shall begin with the Posyetsky District and the districts adjacent to Grodekovo.” The second and third stages were determined by the regional leadership after the adoption in early September of a series of decrees by the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR on the “resettlement of Koreans” without mentioning border areas, guided by the criterion of the distance of the eviction districts from the external borders and the chronology of execution.

In accordance with the established eviction queues, the regional and provincial *troikas*, at their extended meetings, developed a schedule for loading and dispatching trains, approved collection points for those being deported, train waiting points, railway stations, and departure sidings. Each train was assigned a letter and a number, with an indicated loading location and departure time. Each train was led by a commander, who was in charge of the car supervisors, all of whom were trusted Koreans. A train consisted, on average, of 50 passenger cars, one “class” (passenger) car, one ambulance car, one kitchen car, 5-6 covered freight cars, and 2 open flatcars. Freight cars for transporting cargo and livestock were hastily equipped with bunk beds and a potbelly stove. A single car carried 5-6 families (25-28 people), though in rare cases, the number of people reached 30 (Kim, 2023). The travel time from the Far Eastern Territory to unloading stations in Kazakhstan took 30-40 days (Lee & Kim, 1992).

The preparation and implementation of the deportation involved the strictest punitive control, both vertically within the party, and other state agencies, and horizontally across the entire region. During the census, passports and hunting weapons were confiscated. A vast network of agents monitored every word and action of the Koreans. Unique documents, so-called numbered special reports, have been preserved in the Far Eastern state archives, detailing the progress of the resettlement and the political mood in the districts slated for deportation (Central States of the Russian Far East, file R2413, inventory 2, case 804, pp. 219-224; State Archives of Khabarovsk Krai, file P2, inventory 1, case 1316, pp. 33-34). These documents indicate that “the Korean population was by no means a meek victim of the deportation. The most courageous among them openly opposed the arbitrary and lawless behaviour of the authorities, calling for departure abroad, the destruction of livestock and crops, and disobedience” (Lee & Kim, 1992). Monitoring of the Koreans’ every move did not end with their deportation from the Far Eastern Territory, as evidenced by the section *Intelligence Support for Echelons*, which reads in one sentence: “The dispatched echelons of Koreans are provided with intelligence (see the report on this issue)” in a document titled *Final Report on the Resettlement of Koreans in the Khabarovsk District*, signed by the district *troika* (State Archives of Khabarovsk Krai, file P2, inventory 1, case 1552, p.3). Surveillance of the deportees continued throughout their entire journey and upon arrival in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

6. Misrepresentations about human casualties and the reality of human losses from deportation

Emotional recollections of older Koreans, numerous newspaper and magazine publications by quick-witted journalists, and frankly weak scholarly articles by researchers have created an exaggerated narrative of massive human losses during the deportation. An analysis of archival documents, statistical data, and eyewitness accounts suggests that shortly before and during the deportation, no significant migration of Soviet Koreans outside the Far East was observed. The number of deaths during the transport, including those killed in the tragic accident of train No. 505 on September 13, 1937, at Verino station near Khabarovsk,¹ likely amounts to several hundred (Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, file 1208, inventory 1, case 23, pp.3-5 and case 109, p.66). The exact number of fatalities is difficult to determine for various objective reasons. Still, it is undeniable that the two extreme age groups, the elderly and children, were hit the hardest.

There are still no complete and reliable data on the size of the Soviet Korean population in other regions of Russia at the time of the deportation. The history of the deportation of a small number of Koreans to the [Astrakhan](#) and Rostov regions remains poorly understood. It is known that, during the difficult initial period of the Great Patriotic War², in mid-December 1941, all Koreans were deported from southern Russia to Kazakhstan. A few days before the deportation, “men from the labour army who had been digging trenches and anti-tank ditches near [Stalingrad](#) were released” (Niva, 1997).

Soviet censuses are the only large demographic database in existence for all peoples. According to comparative data, during the intercensal period 1939-1959, the number of Koreans in Kazakhstan declined precipitously, by 23,277 people. The loss of almost a quarter of the Korean population in one republic can be explained by the following reasons. Firstly, the natural and climatic differences between the regions of deportation and settlement, the lack of conditions for traditional economic activities such as rice cultivation and irrigated vegetable growing, and the harsh living conditions caused a mass exodus of Soviet Koreans to the irrigated agricultural regions of Uzbekistan. The exodus to the neighbouring republic was partly motivated by a desire to reunite with family members who had been deported to Uzbekistan. As of February 10, 1940, according to incomplete data from the Resettlement Department of the Kyzyl-Orda Regional Executive Committee, since the beginning of 1938, out of a total of 5,506 Korean settlers, 1,827 households (excluding workers and employees) have moved or moved to the Uzbek Soviet Social Republic, i.e. more than 10,000 people. Secondly, in the first years in the new location, deportees experienced a high mortality rate. In many Korean settler collective farms, epidemic diseases, mass gastrointestinal diseases, and colds with extensive fatal outcomes were widespread (Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, file 1208, inventory 1, case 30, p. 81). The mortality rate exceeded the republic’s average by almost two times: in 1937, Kazakhstan’s mortality rate was 18.3 per thousand, and in 1938, 16.3 per thousand (Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, file 698, inventory 14, case 208, p. 14 and case 219, p. 14). A particularly high mortality rate is recorded among children, or more precisely, infants. According to informants, children died in every Korean family, and in many large families, half or fewer of the infants survived ([V. Kim](#), 1997). Certainly, the human losses among the deported Soviet Koreans would have been greater if Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and other locals had not helped save the displaced people from hunger and cold.

7. Narratives about the unexpected arrival of deported Koreans in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

The Party and Government Resolution of August 21, 1937, on the resettlement of Soviet Koreans, obliged “the Council of People’s Commissars of the Kazakh SSR [Soviet Socialist Republic] to immediately determine the areas and points of resettlement and outline measures to ensure economic development in the new places, providing them with the necessary assistance” (Lee & Kim, 1992).

Analysis of declassified documents from the Central Committees of the Communist Parties and Councils of People’s Commissars of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan revealed that the republics’ top leadership was informed of the large-scale operation without any prior discussion. On August 23, [Levon Mirzoyan](#), Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Kazakh SSR, and [Nikolay Gikalo](#), his counterpart in the Uzbek SSR, briefed members of the Bureau of the Central Committees of the republican Communist Parties on the contents of the decree on the deportation of Koreans. In [Alma-Ata](#) and [Tashkent](#), a decision was made to establish special commissions for the reception and settlement of Korean immigrants, headed by the Chairmen of the Council of People’s Commissars of Kazakh SSR and Uzbek SSR. However, actual operational leadership was entrusted to the NKVD organs, which were authorized to act as the Council of People’s Commissars’ Commissioner for the Resettlement and Settlement of Koreans ([Kim](#), 1999). All orders of the commissioner were mandatory for all People’s commissariats, departments, and specially created regional commissions for the reception and placement of settlers (Archives of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, file 798, inventory 1, case 53b, p.1).

In the note from the People’s Commissar of the NKVD of the USSR on the progress of the Korean resettlement operation and preparations for their reception in the Kazakh and Uzbek SSRs, addressed to Stalin, it was reported that echelon formation had already begun in the Far East. A total of 39 echelons, carrying approximately 8,000 first-priority families, will be formed and dispatched from September 9 to September 23. This means that the areas on the front lines of the fortified border zone will be liberated from Koreans by September 23. According to the approved Schedule of Echelon Loading and Departure on the Far Eastern Railway, the first loading stations were established at Golenki, Knoring, and Sviyagino, with the first echelon scheduled for departure on September 9, 1937, and the last, the 39th echelon, from Nadezhdinsk station, scheduled for departure on September 23. On October 29, 1937, in a note addressed to Stalin and Molotov, People’s Commissar Yezhov reported that the deportation of Koreans from the Far Eastern Front was completed on October 25. A total of 124 echelons of Koreans, comprising 36,442 families and 171,781 individuals, were deported (Lee & Kim, 1992).

Steam-powered trains carrying deported Koreans moved very slowly, with frequent stops to load coal, take on water, and sit idle at sidings. The total distance from Khabarovsk and Vladivostok to the main railway junction was 6,000-7,000 kilometres, depending on changes in the main route, including over 4,000 kilometres through Russia and approximately 2,000 kilometres through Kazakhstan. The journey time, based on rough estimates rather than documented schedules, was 30 to 40 days.

The list of trains arriving in Kazakhstan with Soviet Koreans resettled from the Far East dates back to late October – early November 1937, with no indication of arrival dates. The first train, which arrived at Ushtobe station in the Karatal district of the Almaty region, carried 1,705 deported Koreans (379 families). The total number of Koreans delivered to the Karatal district across the three trains was 4,666 individuals (1,015 families) (Administration of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, file 725, inventory 2, case 717, pp. 72-91).

One of the first government documents defining the geographic settlement of Soviet Koreans in Kazakhstan was the Resolution of the Council of People's Commissars of the Kazakh SSR of October 9, *On the Settlement and Economic Arrangements of Korean Migrants* (Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, file 1987, inventory 1, case 2, pp.1-5). The resettlement of Koreans to Kazakhstan occurred in two stages. The first began with their expulsion from the Far East and ended with temporary resettlement at unloading points. The second stage, the intra-republican economic and territorial redistribution of the Korean population, began in the spring of 1938 and was completed by the end of the year.

In Kazakhstan, as of December 1, 1938, 18,525 Korean families were resettled: in the Alma-Ata region - 4,191, Kyzyl-Orda - 7,613, Karaganda - 1,225, Aktobe - 758, Kustanai - 1,040, Guryev - 1,075, North Kazakhstan - 778, West Kazakhstan - 512 and South Kazakhstan - 1,269 (Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, file 1208, inventory 1, case 26a, p. 103). By December 1938, Korean resettlement collective farms were located as follows: in the Kyzyl-Orda region - 28, Alma-Ata region - 19, Aktobe region - 4; North Kazakhstan region - 5; South Kazakhstan region - 2; Guryevsk - 3 Korean fishing collective farms, Karaganda region - 3 and Kustanay region - 2 collective farms (Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, file 1208, inventory 1, case 2, p.18 and case 26a, p. 49). As of January 1, 1939, 3,939 Korean families, totalling 16,488 people, were settled in 203 local collective farms; 5,894 families (21,493 people) were placed in 91 state farms, [machine-tractor stations](#), industrial enterprises, handicraft industrial cooperatives, business and public organizations as workers and employees. The transfer of 520 Korean families, totalling 2,871 people, who were counted as settled in Kazakhstan, to the Astrakhan enterprises of the State Fishery Trust for placement has been documented (Kan, 1994). From the recollections of Petr Stepanovich Tyu (born in 1927), Ilya Lvovich Lyang (born in 1925), and Te Bun Sen (born in 1926), currently residing in [Astana](#), it was confirmed that an entire train with Koreans arrived in Astrakhan, who were then “scattered” among fishing villages. In mid-December 1941, all Koreans were evicted to Kazakhstan (Niva, 1997).

As of November 15, 1938, a total of 16,453 families, comprising 74,206 Korean settlers, had been settled in Uzbekistan. Of these families, 10,946 were settled on collective farms ([P. Kim](#), 1993). By the spring of 1938, approximately half of the Korean settlers had been settled on “independent Korean collective farms,” while the rest were “additionally resettled” on Uzbek collective farms. In the Tashkent region, six Korean collective farms were created in the Nizhne-Chirchik district, 13 in the Sredne-Chirchik district, and 4 in the Verkhne-Chirchik district. In other regions, Korean collective farms were created as follows: nine in Samarkand, five in Fergana, three in Khorezm, and five in Karakalpakstan. 5,145 Korean families were settled on 211 Uzbek collective farms (Central State Archives of the Republic of Uzbekistan, file 100, inventory 1, case 1, pp.74-78). Over 2,500 Korean families were resettled in the Uzbek cities of Tashkent, Samarkand, Fergana, Namangan, Andijan, Kokand, Bukhara, and elsewhere. As of November 15, 1938, there were 16,307 Korean families, or 74,500 people, in Uzbekistan (Central State Archives of the Republic of Uzbekistan, file P-837, inventory 27, case 39, p.19).

On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and many Koreans wanted to go to the front, but only a few hundred were permitted to take up arms to defend their homeland. [Captain Alexander Min](#) is the only Korean to be posthumously awarded the highest title in the Soviet Union, [Hero of the Soviet Union](#) (Shin et al., 2011). Several thousand Koreans were mobilized into the “labour army” to build fortifications, repair roads and bridges, and mine coal in the mines of [Qaraganda](#), [Angren](#), and [Vorkuta](#).

During and after the war, Soviet Koreans made significant contributions to agriculture, and 206 Soviet Koreans were awarded the highest labour award, *Hero of Socialist Labour*, including 132 in the Uzbek SSR, 67 in the Kazakh SSR, and one in the RSFSR (Shin, 2021). Among the 201 people twice awarded the title of Hero of Socialist Labour is Kim Pen Hva, chairman of the Polar Star collective farm in the Srednechirchik district of the Tashkent region of the Uzbek SSR (1948, 1951) (Pak, 2006).

A turning point in the lives of Koreans, like all other Soviet peoples, was the death of Stalin in 1953 and the beginning of de-Stalinization. In the 1950s and 1960s, Soviet Koreans began successfully cultivating new crops: cotton, corn, sugar beets, kenaf, vegetables, and melons. Along with the rapid advancement of higher education and the urbanization of Koreans, they made significant advances in management, engineering, science, and culture. By the 1970s and 1980s, Koreans occupied a prominent place in the scientific and creative intelligentsia, as well as in education, healthcare, sports, and public administration (Men, 2008).

On the eve of the collapse of the USSR (1991), approximately three-quarters of Koreans lived in the Central Asian republics, primarily Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. At the same time, Korean communities were forming in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic states, and the Caucasus. [Sakhalin](#) Koreans, who underwent the complex process of integrating into Soviet society and obtaining citizenship, became an important component of the Korean population in the USSR (Kuzin, 2006; Pak, 2019). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of new sovereign states in Central Asia marked a new stage in the history of the Koryo Saram, who were once again forced to adapt to the post-Soviet reality. Political, economic, and sociocultural changes provoked anxiety about the future among all former Soviet peoples, which was reflected in the growth and expansion of cross-border migration. Most Koreans migrated to the so-called “near abroad,” including several thousand to the Primorsky Krai in the Russian Far East, the [Volgograd](#) and [Saratov](#) regions, and Ukraine. The exodus of over 13,000 Koreans from Tajikistan was a consequence of the [civil war](#) and was massive and forced, making Korean migrants from Tajikistan war refugees.

During the transition from a planned socialist to a market economy, Koreans demonstrated a high level of social mobility. In a short period, their presence in business, finance, trade, services, and government significantly increased. The subsequent migration of Koreans from the [Commonwealth of Independent States](#) (CIS) was reflected in the rapid growth of labour migration to South Korea, which is experiencing an acute labour shortage. Currently, the number of Koreans from Central Asian countries and Russia in Korea stands at 100,000 and continues to grow.

New diaspora elites have emerged within the Korean community, combining entrepreneurship and business with civic engagement and participation in government bodies. Overall, the post-Soviet history of Koreans in the USSR and CIS countries is characterized by continued, accelerated urbanization, high social mobility, active participation in the economic, scientific, and cultural development of their respective homelands, the strengthening and expansion of ties with their ethnic homeland, and the formation of multiple identities.

Dr. German Kim, a descendant of Koreans who began settling in the Russian Far East in the late 19th century and were deported to the Central Asian republics under Stalinism in 1937, is one of the most internationally renowned scholars to have studied the Koryo-Saram community. Dr. Kim is the director of the Institute of Asian Studies at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Kazakhstan and Professor of the Department for Far East Studies, Faculty for Oriental Studies. He is the author of more than 70 articles and books, including three volumes of the History of Korean Immigration.

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¹ On September 13, 1937, train No. 505, carrying displaced persons, crashed at Verino station near Khabarovsk. Twenty-one people died, including eight children. According to eyewitnesses, the train's front seven cars were completely destroyed ([Arysmidia](#)).

² The term used in Russia and the former Soviet Union to define the period of WWII from the Nazi invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941, to the capitulation of Nazi Germany on May 9, 1945.