LeninKichi and the Silenced Collective Memory of Soviet Koreans

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Abstract: This paper investigates the contexts on the grand narrative and the memory manipulation of the media in the case of Soviet Korean migrants. The study focuses on the forced migration of Soviet Koreans and how their memories were covered up by dominant Soviet narratives. Specifically, the paper explores *LeninKichi*, a Korean newspaper that became the mouth of institutional power. The research brings to light part of the history of Soviet Koreans migrants, whose memories were buried by a socio-cultural system that encouraged narratives of victory and progress through an oppositional symbolism of glorious patriots versus enemies and traitors.
Keywords: collective memory, dominant narratives, *LeninKichi*, Soviet Koreans

THE POLITICS OF MEDIA REPRESENTATION IN SOVIET MEDIA

One of the main roles of media is to support the limited memories of individuals and turn their private memories into the historical and public memories of social groups. There is a process of reconstruction of these individual memories and historical evidences as a practical mechanism to raise awareness on the identity of a certain group (Joo 2015: 9), and this reconstruction takes place by means of the discursive and performative actions exercised by various agents in power. The mediatic use of particular symbolism, shared and distributed in different media, is fundamental (Lee 2010: 62; Jung 2010: 197; Tae 2013: 148). Thus, memories are mediatized under the guise of cultural forms and their political reconstructions serve as frameworks for the recognition of the past, ruling prospective forms of behaviour (Tae 2013: 146, 149). In this respect, past events, whether remembered or forgotten, are space where power-politics are involved.

Unilateral socio-cultural representations of the former Soviet Union took place throughout all centralized Soviet territories in a comprehensive manner. The Soviet media system was rooted in Marxist materialism, claiming that any cultural production reflected the specific interests of the

ruling classes. During the Soviet Revolution, Lenin had a clear consciousness of the inherent political power of media as an efficient means for politicizing and mobilizing the proletariat to stand against the bourgeois media (McNair 1991: 25). Despite the Bolsheviks' initial intention to oppose the one-Party dictatorship, their movement quickly added up in another one-Party system by prohibiting all types of anti-Bolshevik Party activities and media (Ibid. 26). Soviet media became a tool of social control in 1929, when Stalin's power was firmly controlling the Party (Ibid. 28).

The *LeninKichi* (translated as 'the Banner of Lenin'), was a newspaper in Korean created by Koreans in the context of their forced migration in 1937. However, the newspaper did not voice the narratives of their own tragic experiences and their memories remain undiscovered.

The dissolution of the Cold War structure brought about the declassification of the Soviet Union's secret documents and a torrent of testimonies based on the experiences of the forcedly migrated generation. Although the memories of former Soviet Koreans could be researched in various ways, there remain many undisclosed documents on those who experienced the migration. Thus, the task of recovering the broken history of the silenced Soviet Koreans is still incomplete. The research presented in this paper analyzes texts in *LeninKichi* in order to identify why Soviet Koreans kept silent about their own history and why they became rapidly incorporated into Soviet society. The study reveals their collective consciousness dominated by means of cultural forms of oppression, and their spirit of resistance paralyzed within the strict censorship system exercised by Soviet media.

SOVIET KOREAN HISTORY OF FORCED MIGRATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF KOREAN MEDIA ABROAD

Koreans in the so-called Maritime Province were the migrants who had settled there in Russia, after crossing the Duman River in the northern border of the Korean peninsula. They were fleeing from Japanese occupation and the social unrest taking place during the late Joseon era after the 1860s. Until imperialist Japan annexed the Korean peninsula around the 1900s, the Maritime Province served as the overseas Koreans' base of independence movement, where the national intellectuals and capitalists led the anti-Japanese struggles, including the facilitation of

Korean educational institutions and media, political and cultural activities, such as the maintenance of an independent army and a Korean project for social awareness. Once the Soviet system was established in the Far East after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and homeland Korea was under complete control of Imperial Japan, the energy of Soviet Koreans in the Maritime Province rapidly transformed from an anti-Japanese independence movement into a Soviet revolutionary movement. Given the fact that solidarity with the homeland was almost broken, the anti-Japanese independence troops became incorporated into the Soviet revolutionary force so that the driving force of the national independence movement could no longer be activated.

After the emergence of the Soviet system, Stalin's commanding forces migrated Korean population from the Far Eastern province into the Central Asia region. This unexpected event deprived them of the way of life they had paved after their first migration. The trains that carried those migrants during long trip of over a month were like prison cells. Migrants were thrown into the waggons as if they were luggage or livestock. The wagons were exposed to the cold night air and many fell victim to diseases, starvation and death. There have been no precise statistics of the death toll during the migration of Soviet Koreans. The total number of Soviet Korean migrants was about 180,000 according to the official statistics at the time. In the late 1920s, the number was estimated at around 250,000 including both registered and unregistered residents (Petrov 1929: 45). Many testimonies (for instance Myong 2019: 59) indicate that the difference between numbers before and after the migration, and the fact that almost no Soviet Koreans were born in the year of forced migration, show that the number of victims was much larger than the statistics suggest. Those who survived were in in miserable condition and had to endure a series of ordeals such as continuous relocation, lack of proper dwellings, separation from their families, trauma, fear and other psychological problems.

On March 1937, the Russian broadsheet newspaper, formerly the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, *Pravda* ("*Truth*") posted an article in which Far Eastern Koreans were described as "Japanese spies" (Kwon 1996: 69). The Soviet Korean society began to stir upon hearing the news that they would be forcibly migrated again. Many Korean men disappeared after they were suddenly visited and carried by a scary *chorni vogon* ("*prison van*") without prior notice (Jeong

2007: 257). Anyone talking about the forced migration, or complaining of its illegitimacy, became the target of apprehension, signalled as an "anti-revolutionary element" and "enemy of the people", thought to be hidden amid Party executives, expert groups, workers, farmers, and various ethnic minorities such as Koreans, Germans, and Tartars, and Chechens (Han S. & Han B. 1999: 49). Regardless of whatever office they held, even the Party members were hunted down, their Certificates of Member of the Communist Party confiscated, and they were purged in the name of misconduct, non-compliance or violation of the Communist Code.

Many Koreans were removed under slander and snitching. A distrust and weariness towards each other grew amid the Korean population, who frequently witnessed secret accusations amid their own group in order to protect themselves (Myong 2019: 162). The number of Koreans who disappeared in this way amounted to about 2,500 persons (*KoryoIlbo*, Dec.12, 1992; Kwon 1996: 77). The Stalinist trials on the apprehended were concluded by the so-called *Troika*—the Communist Party Committee, the Soviet Executive Committee, and the People's Committee of Internal Affairs. They were summary trials mostly lasting up to ten days, concluding with the defendant's confession, without a lawyer. Sentences were read out and defendants immediately executed or taken to concentration camps (Jeong 2007: 254; Han S. & Han B. 1999: 49).

The 17 Korean newspapers, journals and magazines that operated in the Far Eastern region quickly ceased to be published, and about 350 Korean schools and colleges of higher education were closed down almost at once (Han S. & Han B. 1999: 333). Right after the migration, more than 40 ethnic schools for the Soviet Koreans were opened within the former Kazakh SSR (Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic) (Men *et. al.* 1999: 190). Such ethnic schools were considered a place of ethnic bourgeois and they were subject to "Ethnic School Reorganization" on April 8, 1938. The conversion required that everyone should study in Russian instead of in their own ethnic languages (Ibid. 186-187). On December 27, 1939, there was a new command requiring the use of Marxist-Leninist books, many of them by Party leaders. Books of ethnic groups written in their ethnic languages were destroyed (Ibid. 335). Most employees in Soviet Korean media were also eliminated. In the meantime *LeninKichi* published its first issue on May 15, 1938, in the Kyzylorda Province of former Kazakh SSR.

In 1939, he Soviet regime propagandized their achievements by means of the publication of around 9,000 Soviet newspapers of which 2,294 were produced in 58 different languages (*LeninKichi*, May 6, 1940: 2). Korean media continued to use their ethnic language and served as the only cultural channel to express the arts and letters of Koreans alongside a type of Korean theatre known as *Koryo Geukjang*. In spite of the use of ethnic names, Korean media were typically Soviet, and any content was subject to censorship measures and the control of Soviet central power. Only in 1990 there was a new media law passed. By then, the *LeninKichi* had fulfilled its role as a Soviet organ of Communist propaganda and control over the local community, politicizing and mobilizing the people in the interests of the Communist Party.

LENINKICHI

The newspaper known as *LeninKichi* was published for 53 years since its creation on May 15, 1938 and until its closing on December 31, 1990, just before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This newspaper was the only Korean media distributed across the territories of the former Soviet Union. The size of circulation was 6,000 in its initial phase, exceeding 10,000 at the late 1950s. Publication frequency was initially irregular, about two to three times a week. Since 1952, it was published six times a week. Articles were printed on four pages, the first three of which covered the news of the central Party committee, the leader's speech text, the Republic's decisions on important policies, a platform of principles, the report on unit-based performance of Soviet projects, and the life as Communist Party members. The remaining page covered the war situation, foreign news, and a message from the editor. In the late 1950s, the newspaper also included creative literature and art.

As mentioned, this study offers some reasons behind the silence that Koreans kept at the time, revealing the power structure of Soviet media. The *LeninKichi* was the Korean translation from an original Russian text, full of socialist terms unfamiliar to Koreans. Thus, the initial readership felt difficulty in understanding the articles and requested additional commentaries and a dictionary of annotations (*LeninKichi*, May 5, 1941: 3). The newspaper followed the North Korean orthography and grammar because most Soviet Koreans came from the Hamgyeong Province of

North Korea, settling in the Maritime Province first before being deported to Central Asia. The focus of this investigation has been the period following the forced migration until the postwar reconstruction after the Second World War. The social status of Koreans was enhanced and relativley stabilized after the war, having passed through the shock of migration, rapid adaptation and crisis of identity.

In order to connect the broken contexts of Soviet Korean history, lost in ¡newspaper coverage, the author of this paper references the Soviet secret documents and white papers made available after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s as well as on the newspaper *Koreilbo*, successor of *LeninKichi*, where the testimonies of the generation that experienced forced migration, and various studies on former Soviet Koreans have appeared.

THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN PATRIOTS AND ENEMIES

The political articles covered on every issue of *LeninKichi* mainly cited the instructions from the central ruling offices, consistently delivering the core propaganda messages on the excellence of the communist ideological system and praising political leaders. Messages repeatedly emphasized the dichotomy between those working on the side of the state and those who were enemies. They also used provocative phrases in order to instigate struggle against the enemies. Besides, propaganda was sent to eligible voters during election campaigns. Such messages remined people of their heroism in building an ideal communist system in which workers were sovereign and enjoyed forms of modernized prosperity, freedom and equality, with illiteracy eradicated. This modernity was contrasted with the backward and unenlightened colonial state of pre-revolutionary Czar Era, and warned that "if you want to live in this ideal republic, as the newly resurrected peoples you should commit to Stalin and the Party, and cast votes for the Bolsheviks." (*LeninKichi*, Jun 15, 1938: 1)

On the opposite side, capitalism, nationalism, and fascism in foreign powers were all see as external enemies of the state. Those followers of Trotsky, initially Stalin's comrade and later his political opponent, were also inside enemies. In both cases, they were foes of the people, fascists, spies or secret agents, described as vicious beings with hideous muzzles. In contrast, Stalin was heroically praised as great leader and creator of the

most democratic constitution that eradicated all contradictions of society, father of the homeland who opened the way to the people's liberation from a previous state of slavery and exploitation, bringing happiness to people.

Any social, political or economic problems were seen as the result of the actions of "Party foes" (Han 1999: 46). People were also encouraged to participate zealously in the disclosure and overt self-criticism so as to make visible the "humility of Bolsheviks" and the "Bolshevist antidotal project." (*LeninKichi*, May 22, 1938: 1) Such an active disclosure of mistakes and problems took place as a sort of ritual during the regular meetings of Party units, bringing to light people who may have been involved in acts of corruption, such as abuse of public money, poor project performance in the fields of agriculture, fishery, industry and education, or in local administrative units. Many Soviet Koreans belonging to *Kolhhoz* or communal farms lacked formal instructions to develop projects. There were also problems such as poor irrigation and technological support, including a lack of tractors, oil, etc. But any complains, insufficient preparations or unenthusiastic campaigns were considered violations against the Party. Negligence in finding the so-called 'enemies within' was considered a pro bourgeois nationalism activity. Those who kept silent on disclosure, or suppressed criticism, were pointed out as failing to eradicate foe elements. Finally, those who were indifferent to the revolutionary spirit were also targeted (Ibid. May 22, 1938: 1; Jun 4, 1938: 3).

People were persistently encouraged to prove that they were zealous patriots" and not enemies of the Party, the system, and the people. This coercive system was an effective means of persuading audiences and direct people's intentions according to power structures, thus creating a continuous tension and sense of control amongst people.

CONTROL DEVICES FOR SOVIET KOREANS' COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

As mentioned, *LeninKichi* does not show any traces of collective or individual ordeals among Soviet Koreans. Written in Korean and with sections on Korean art, literature and culture under the mask of preserving ethnicity, it was not possible to use terms such as nation or national

language, which would have immediately driven out an accusation of bourgeois nationalism. Thus, Soviet Koreans were deprived of any real social communication paths through which to show concerns about their forced migration, their relocation and poor settlement, or any other difficulties they experienced. Any Korean writers who voiced any reminiscences or nostalgia for the past became targets of punishment. For example, a Korean poem named "To the Lady Plowing a Field" was posted on a wall newspaper at the School of Education in Kyzylorda State University, the Korean poet Taesu Kang was accused by an anonymous informant of expressing the nostalgia and had to serve a five-year sentence in prison and later exile for 16 years (Choi 2007: 14).

Similarly, signs of difficulty or distress for the present conditions was considered taboo. For example, difficulties in trying to open a newspaper, the lack of professional staff, lack of support by the Party organization, or shortage of journalists were common complains that could not be formulated (*LeninKichi*, May 15, 19381: 4). Korean media ascribed all the responsibilites for the problems to themselves. (Ibid.)

Under the restrictions on immigrants' relocation, their desperate voices for finding scattered family members fell on deaf ears. A number of petitions with sad stories were found in Kazakhstani and Uzbek archives after the Soviet dissolution (Sim 2008: 222). Advertisements to find missing family members were published continuously until June 1939, two years after the migration. The names oft the missing and those of the seekers, together with their addresses, were shown on the bottom of the last page of the newspaper.

Influenced by the posthumous criticism towards the Stalin's power, the oppressive atmosphere across the whole society was somehow mitigated, but the basic frame of media control was consistently maintained. Newspaper companies were operated by strict instructions about the whole process of publication, distribution, and sale. For instance, an official Soviet document from 1958 included instructions by the Central Committee Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan addressed to the editor-in-chief of *LeninKichi* regarding the establishment of a new book department with four staff members which was to publish a 100 page work for mass instigation by the end of the year as well as importing three of four North Korean films a year; and publish a selection of plays distributed by the authority in the ethnic language (Korean) (Kim & Men 1995: 242).

The Far Eastern region of North Korea was described as the ancient homeland and the land of Korean ancestors who had fought for the Soviet Revolution. Only pro-Soviet activities were given visibility, with the heroic stories of Alexandra Kim, Beomdo Hong, and the like, as adaptations to the values of political propaganda.

According to Article 103 of the Constitution of Kazakh SSR approved on March 26, 1937, freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association were guaranteed (*LeninKichi*, May 28, 1938: 3). But Soviet media allowed extremely limited content, banning production of volunteer and creative media. This impregnable structure of dense power networks of surveillance, self-criticism, mutual observation, and disclosure, and taboos built a body of zealous propagandists and instigators. Ethnic groups were forced to repress their own cultural values and pursue Soviet rules, silencing Koreans collective memory.

BECOMING SOVIET HEROES

Soviet Koreans came to have completely different identity. Branded as "potential Japanese spies" or "administrative exiles" (Lee & Kim 1997: 71), they were deprived of their identification cards and the freedom of relocation. Their life at the new settlements forced them to choose between becoming the losers or victors in the survival game. The only way out of social dishonor was to become acknowledged Soviets, even if they had to endure victimization and distress. They endeavored to become successful by receiving the Soviet-style education, being elected directly as delegates every three months, assuming positions and participating in Soviet meetings of low-rank representatives, and also becoming the Party members (Lee 2011).

Often cited in Stalin's speech texts, everyone resorted to become a *Stakhanov*, the Soviet miner as a labor hero, symbol of the true communist; a figure used to promote labor productivity and publicize the excellence of the Soviet economic system. Another model was *Papanin,* the Soviet scientific hero. (*LeninKichi*, May 24, 1938: 1). The Koreans, who were mostly affiliated to an agricultural *kolkhoz*, were reprimanded at times as the criminals; short of the *Stakhanov* and the Bolshevik spirit of struggle (Ibid. May 28, 1938: 4; May 30, 1938: 1).

The Second World War was another major tragedy in which Soviet Koreans paid the price of victimization. Paradoxically, it became the foothold for the Koreans to become socially acknowledged. The articles on every issue published during the war period carried mainly news of victory and enemy's surrender, as well as the acquisition of captives and trophies. When it came to the enemy states and their allies, i.e. Germany, Italy, and Japan, the same articles emphasized their personal and material loss, barbarism, belligerence, and inhumane activities so as to instigate the collective hatred and hostility of the Soviets against the fascist groups and thus encourage a sense of fight and heroism. As special migrants, the Koreans had no right to participate in the war and were largely disappointed about being deprived of an opportunity to join the Great Patriotic War (Soviet-German War) and defeat the fascists. According to the intelligence report of the Council of People's Commissars of the Soviet Union drawn up in August 1943, many Korean young people submitted petitions for the dispatch to the frontline, but to no avail (Bugai 1998: 139 qtd in Sim 2008: 222). Some Koreans even falsified their age and Kazakh or Kyrgyz names when submitting applications to the military committee in order to join the military forces, and participate in the war. Amongst them, some became war heroes, adding a new page to Soviet history of victory (AKNC 2009: 30).

Most Koreans who were not allowed to participate in the war were kept working at bases as laborers in strategic industries, together with prisoners and captives. In the coal mines located at Karaganda, Korean casualties were no less than 2,000 (Kang et.al. 1997: 89). They were granted the title of 'labor heroes' sacrificed during the war. Korean *kolkhozes* set world records of harvesting 15 tons per hectare in scientific forms of rice-farming. With this money earned, many Korean contributors appeared, including Mansam Kim who spearheaded the Korean *kolkhozes*. These contributors donated money to the national defense fund, for use in manufacturing combat equipment such as fighter planes and tanks. Donations were accompanied by a letter requesting the defeat of Hitler's imperialist forces (*LeninKichi*, Dec 27, 1942: 1).

Soviet Koreans displayed volunteer commitment and loyalty at the battlefields, as coal mines workers, and laborers in farms during the Second World War, transforming themselves into persons of merit following Soviet models and state's demands. In the case of *Karatal raion*,

Kazakhstani Alma-Ata oblast, an administrative division or region in the former Soviet territories, persons of merit, acknowledged as Labor Heroes during the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) numbered 3,861, the number of Koreans was over 1,000. Considering Soviet Korean population in the city, this number represented an exceptionally high proportion than that any other ethnic group (*LeninKichi*, March 17, 1990: 3).

During the wartime crisis, the media was again a field of instigation to encourage people's resolution to fight. Inspired by media news of victory and heroism, young Soviet Koreans became the warriors ready to die at the front or in rear lines of the war. Thanks to this sacrificial feat, Koreans dispelled any dishonor and became reborn as the true Soviets.

CONCLUSION

Soviet Koreans became completely incorporated into the new ruling system and turned into admirable models in Soviet society. However, their past had to be forgotten in the process. Revealing their experiences and traumatic memories was not the way to survival. The Soviet social system based on overarching social control was an incubator that forcibly silenced their past and mass-produced *Homo Sovieticus*, customized Soviet human beings.

The dominant power that monopolized national narrativization by means of a reign of terror brainwashed people by means of oppositional symbolisms. The progressive narrative that the past was the world of illiteracy and the present the new world of ideal socialism instilled the belief that they could become great Soviet revolutionaries and builders of an ideal world. This system endlessly hunted down any enemies with self-criticism and censorship, stimulating collective hostility against internal enemies and external ones during the wartime crisis, mobilizing Korean people as war heroes, part of victory narratives. Keeping silent on their history at the expense of self-sacrifice, Koreans were able to escape from the status of social aliens becoming assimilated into the mainstream society.

Self-evaluations of former Soviet Koreans and of their existential values reveal ambivalence. One of such is the life of *Mankurt,* a captive in a Kyrgyz legend whose head was capped with horsehide by invaders so that memories would disappear (Lee 2007: 125). And the other is, against this

life of dishonor, the history of successful settlement (Han 2008: 81), where Soviet Koreans chose to eliminate past tragic experiences. More research is needed in order to reveal the contexts of silenced Korean history.

Acknowledgement: The research was supported by the 2020 Korean Studies Grant Program of Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2020-R10).

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