

Deribas and “Korean question” in USSR at 1920-1930s

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The goal of this report is to present picture of consideration of “Korean question” in USSR and position of Deribas - leader of Far Eastern NKVD.

1. Ethnic repression in Stalin period

Stalin’s repressions in the Soviet Union are a topic of discussion not

merely in Russia, but also abroad. Scholars published some hundreds monographs and thousands research articles about this subject. It is evident that their assessment changes with the political conjuncture, but no one denies that they took place. The ethnic repressions are among the most hotly debated in post-Soviet historiography. On the one hand, their occurrence contradicted the principles of internationalism and the equal rights of peoples, which had been proclaimed by the Soviet leadership already during the Civil War. However, in Stalin period these principles were changed. On the other hand, the echoes of those repressions are still heard today (as in the Chechen Wars, ethnic conflicts in big cities of Russia and so forth). Both of these features clearly present themselves in the case of the first ethnic repression, that of the Soviet Koreans.

Among the most tragic episodes in Stalin period was the persecution of individuals because of national traits, which, in essence, flew in the face of Soviet support for the equality of peoples. Many nationalities of the USSR received pressure for national aspect. The scars of that drama survive until this day, and continue to have an impact both on politics and the way in which the national question plays out in general in contemporary Russia.

2. Korean question

The first victims of these ethnic repressions were Soviet Koreans, a national minority living in the Far East that was not hostile to Soviet power and to a high degree loyal to the Soviet leaders’ policies. In Russian, relatively many works have been published about the deportation of Soviet Koreans, but their attention has mainly been on separate incidents and specific aspects of their fate. In addition, little has been said about the struggle in the Soviet nomenclature and society about this question.

Koreans lived in the territory of the contemporary Maritime District of Far East (in Russian is *Primorskii krai*) before the arrival of Russian expeditions there. They therefore are the indigenous population of the south of Far-Eastern Russia, even if during the first half of the nineteenth century the Korean groups living in the southern Far-Eastern region were small.

The Koreans supported the October Revolution of 1917 and the struggle of the Reds against the Old Regime¹.

After their victory, the Bolsheviks delivered on their promises. On the Primorye region’s territory, a national Korean district (the

¹ Andrei Lankov, “Koreitsy SNG: stranitsy istorii,” *Seul’skii vestnik*, 13 February 2002

Pos'etskii raion) was set up, while Koreans were also identified living in 28 other districts of three regions in total.

But soon after the Reds' victory, the status of the Soviet Koreans in the Far East became a topic of discussion. Already in 1922, even before the end of the Russian Civil War and foreign intervention in the Far East, several Soviet officials suggested the mass transfer of Koreans to the Khabarovsk Region².

The plan to resettle the Korean population could not be executed for a number of reasons. In the first place, it contradicted Bolshevik policies, such as the principle of “internationalism” [the right of nations to self-determination], and the resettlement of the Koreans to regions where the conditions for agriculture were difficult could hardly be called a decoration for their support in the Civil War. Secondly, the Soviet Koreans resided in the extreme south of the Far East and they did not desire to move to the north. An unwilling Korean population in the area might jeopardize Soviet rule there. And, finally, a mass transfer of the Koreans would create great problems in the Maritime region, not in the least in economic terms.

In my opinion, the repression of the Koreans can be divided into three stages. The first stage was the persecution of the Koreans in the course

² Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (State Archive of Russian Federation), fond 1318, 1922-1923, delo 670, list 64

of collectivization from 1930 to 1933; the second, the Party purges from 1934 to 1938; and the third stage was the repression on the basis of national markers in 1937.

Ideologically, the preparation resembled what is called an “information war” these days. In particular, articles were published in the press that stated that among the Koreans many Japanese spies could be found even if no evidence was brought to bear. While the articles’ authors had not encountered such Koreans, they noted that this information was told to them by (the supposedly fully reliable) higher authorities.

The state also gradually prepared the Russian population for the impending repressions. Thus, Russian mass media publications during the 1930s sought to incite the population against the Koreans and Chinese. Among the most telling examples of these were two articles published in the country’s largest newspaper, *Pravda*³. In April 1937 the paper ran items about Japanese espionage in the Soviet Far East.

These pieces claimed that Japanese spies were active in Korea, China, Manchuria, and in the east part of the Soviet Union and that they used Chinese and Koreans who pretended to be local inhabitants as spies. To be specific, the paper wrote that “declassé and corrupt elements among the native population of Manchuria and Korea and

³ I. Volodin, “Inostrannyi shpionazh na sovetskom Dal’men Vostoke,” *Pravda*, 23 April 1937, 1.

professional smugglers and spies” had become in essence Japanese agents. Other papers followed suit. The second-largest newspaper, *Izvestiia*, hinted that the Koreans were Japanese spies⁴.

3. Activity by Deribas

So, in this very complicated period for Far East was changed Head of local NKVD⁵. New leader, Terentij Dmitrievich Deribas, was born in 1883 in the family of Cossacks. He took part in revolutionary activity from 1903, participated in Russian revolutions, Russian Civil war and “red terror”. In 1920s. he was active against Kronstadt and Tambov rebellions. So, as we can see, he was experienced officer with support from Moscow.

Deribas arrived in the Far East in 1929. He had state commissar of 1st rank of NKVD (eq. general of army) and was Head of regional NKVD. Deribas received this position for support of the repressions not only in the region, but in the country too. He played important role in different processes, like collectivization and dekulakization in the Far

4 N. Rubin and Ia. Serebrov, “O podryvnoi deiatel’nosti fashistskikh razvedok v SSSR i zadachakh bor’by s neiu,” *Izvestiia*, 29 - 30 July 1937, 1.

5 NKVD: Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennykh Del, (People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs), under whose authority fell the Soviet security organs in the second half of the 1930s.

East in 1929-1930, participated in repressions among intelligence, scholars, party staff and other. However, “Korean question” was considered by him very differently from other leaders of Soviet state.

But this position was demonstrated not from 1929. Collectivization was started like in other regions, but met passive resistance from Soviet Koreans. State coercion, mass searches and arrests, in other words the tyranny of the authorities, caused Soviet Koreans to leave in huge numbers for China. Thus 60% of the Korean population of the Shkotovskii and Suchanskii districts left for China, as did 50% of the Grodekovskii district, 45% of the Chernigovskii district, and so on⁶.

This massive departure led to great problems in the agriculture and habitation of these districts. The following numbers only concern the proportion of the departed population that had been officially registered: In 1937, some years after the massive exodus of the Korean population to China, Koreans constituted 20% of the population in the Grodekovskii and Shkotovskii districts. Between 1930 and 1934, as we saw earlier, 50% of the Koreans of Grodekovskii district left. Based on those numbers, it transpires that the Korean population in these districts formed 40 - 50% of the total population around 1930. Thus one could conclude that a number of administrative units lost between a fourth to

⁶ Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Khabarovskogo Kraia (State Archive of Khabarovsk Region, Khabarovsk). Fond P-2. Opis. 2-4. delo. 169. list 78-79

a third of the population to emigration. As result, Deribas stopped both processes of repressions against Koreans. Moreover, he started pressure against Russian nationalists, who do not want to support position of internationalism, like people, who were close to Vladimir Arsen`ev.

In my opinion, Deribas did not have private sympathy to East Asian people, like, Koreans, but he was statesman of the Soviet Union at first. In 1933 he arrested and executed 3 Koreans, students of Party school (later rehabilitated)⁷, in 1935 - disbanded two Korean national regiments in Red Army. All Korean soldiers and officers were sent to different Soviet military contingents. But he understood that Soviet Koreans are very important for economic development of region (at that time Korean Diaspora supported all areas of the Far East by agricultural products), they can be useful against Japanese aggressive policy and Deribas used anti-Japanese tendencies of the Soviet Koreans for receiving information about common enemy. Therefore a number of Koreans worked in NKVD.

As result, Deribas critically considered position of Soviet government about Korean deportation to Central Asia. Moreover, he stopped in many events the repressive activity of Moscow commissions

⁷ A.S. Sutorin. *Delo kraevogo massctaba*. Khabarovsk: Dal'nevostochnoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo. 1991. p. 190.

of NKVD in the Far East. His group searched different ways against first ethnic mass deportation in USSR - for example, Deribas and his deputy Zapadnyi tried to consider possibility to move Korean Diaspora from Primorye to Khabarovsk region (central part of Far East). In this case, according to their opinion, Soviet Union does not need to deport Soviet Koreans in the Central Asia.

Moscow sent new commission of NKVD in the Far East with new Head - Genrih Samuilovch Lyushkov. He must prepare Korean deportation for short period. But Lyushkov reported many times about problem with Deribas - he did not support to Moscow commissions⁸. Moreover, he tried to block activity of Lyushkov. To 1937 Moscow understood that Korean deportation was impossible without arrest and liquidation of Deribas. However, Stalin did not want to take responsibility alone, he asked about it Voroshilov and Molotov. Both Soviet leaders supported this resolution and Stalin wrote “Deribas will have to be arrested”. Therefore operations for arrest Deribas and Korean deportation were planned together. Deribas was arrested in August 12th, 1937, order about deportation was created in August 21st and Korean deportation was started in beginning September.

Deribas was executed in July 1938, rehabilitated after Stalin period.

⁸ Arhiv presidenta RF (Archive of President of Russian Federation). Fond. 3. Opis. 24. delo. 317. list 113-114.

4. Conclusion

So, as we can see, Deribas had interesting position to “Korean question”. He destroyed independent military position of the Soviet Koreans in USSR, but he supported Korean diaspora in economic, political and social aspects, protected Koreans in NKVD. Deribas stayed in the position of internationalism, understood importance of Soviet Koreans in the Far East for Soviet Union and had interest to develop it. He negatively considered Korean deportation, fought against it and as result was arrested and executed by Stalin government.

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