

Book Review

**Review of Hyun Gwi Park,
*The Displacement of Borders among
Russian Koreans*
(Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017)**

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Growing up in Soviet Central Asia in the twilight years of the USSR, this reviewer had many friends and classmates of Korean origin. Through primary and middle school, I shared a desk with a Korean girl, Lyuba, and spent many afternoons in their house eating white rice and dishes cooked by her hospitable mother, Tereza, who spoke with me in fluent Uzbek. In the markets, Korean women sold *kimchi* (pronounced *chimchi* in Central Asia) and “Korean salads” improvised from local ingredients to the multi-ethnic populations of the Soviet “Stans”; these foods have now become so ingrained in the locals’ diet that one can hardly imagine any ceremonial table in Central Asia without them. Many of the younger Koreans spoke Russian and considered themselves part of the Russian-speaking “European” groups, but it was not uncommon to hear elderly Koreans speak in their native tongue among themselves. Unlike the “Europeans,” many of whom continue to speak only Russian to the locals and expect to be addressed in Russian even today, a quarter-century after the Soviet collapse, many Koreans have learned to speak the Central

Asian languages fluently. Through these encounters, I often wondered about the paths that had led this enterprising people from East Asia to the arid Central Asian heartland, and marveled at the ways they have integrated into the local societies, enriching the economies and cultures in the process.

My questions were partly answered by Hyun Gwi Park's *Displacement of Borders among Russian Koreans*, which is an original investigation of a long history of Koreans in Russia going back to the imperial times. Park, a South Korean scholar, travelled extensively in the Russian Far East (RFE) and Central Asia to paint a complex picture of Korean lives from the nineteenth century to this day in and around Russia's borderlands. Her analytical focus is mainly on the RFE, but her investigation is anything but static, both spatially and temporally. In five core chapters, plus an Introduction and Epilogue, Park explores the lives of what she collectively names "Russian Koreans" in several settings and periods, most importantly "against the background of their three consecutive displacements from the Korean Peninsula, the Russian Far East, and Central Asia."¹

The resulting story is a fascinating ethnographic exploration of a people separated from its ancestral land by voluntary migration in search of economic opportunities, an enforced exile during Japanese colonization, and the deportations of the Stalin era. Through these movements, the Russian Koreans acquired not only new languages, cultural practices, and survival skills, but also new identities and ways of interaction both within and outside their own group. They also suffered enormous losses in the process; if their early migrations to the Russian Far East deprived them of their hereditary abode on the Korean Peninsula, in the subsequent mass deportations to Central Asia in 1937, the Russian Koreans lost "their traditional way of life and, in many cases, their native language."² Park rightly emphasizes that the Koreans' lack of a territorial unit within the Soviet family of nations—where large ethnic groups were allocated a "national" territory where they could exercise a modicum of autonomy—has been the most significant factor shaping Korean lives in the USSR. The Russian Koreans "endured backbreaking labor because they did not have 'their own land,'" and

“without a territorial base from which to claim a collective identity or social groups in which to claim membership, Russian Koreans appear to be bound together through a ‘de-territorialized’ form of kinship.”³ The effect on the Korean culture of the forced displacement in 1937, officially justified through the need to counter “Japanese espionage” but in reality a product of Stalinist paranoia, was much more significant. Park claims that as a result of their deportation to an unfamiliar region, “Koreans were to some extent ‘Russified’ by their relocation to Central Asia.”⁴ This explains why subsequent generations of Koreans deported from the RFE to Central Asia invariably gave their children Russian names and tended to speak Russian at home, unlike their parents and grandparents.

Park’s study is not confined to the analysis of the 1937 displacement and its consequences; in fact, she devotes the larger part of the book to those who decided to return to the RFE from Central Asia at various points of Soviet and post-Soviet history. Despite the need to survive without a territory of their own, “Koreans have exhibited a tenacious connection to this land [RFE].”⁵ As noted in Chapter 2, many Koreans with living memories of the pre-1937 RFE chose to return to the region after Stalin’s death and the advent of Khrushchev’s “Thaw” in the mid-1950s. More returned nearly four decades later, as the collapse of the USSR led to civil and ethnic unrest in Central Asia, most notably in Tajikistan. Having made their way back to the Russian Far East, the Koreans resorted to ingenious paths to economic self-sufficiency and even prosperity, cultivating rice and vegetables and relying on kinship and mutually beneficial social bonds in establishing peculiar models of economic interaction (such as the *gobonjil* system). In Chapter 3, Park demonstrates, through examples, how their feeling of being “outside” wherever they went encouraged Koreans to be less reliant on the Soviet state and its institutions, and to depend instead on the tried and tested people—fellow Koreans—in resolving the most important issues, such as setting up business or forming brigades of migrant farmers. With a keen eye for detail, Park paints a complex portrait of a contemporary, predominantly Korean, village in the RFE, describing the Koreans’ work (in greenhouses), food (through quotidian and ceremonial food-sharing and food-giving), gender relations and many other aspects of everyday

life. It makes for absorbing reading.

Another peculiar feature of the book is Park's skillful use of an extensive body of anthropological, ethnographic, and other literature in her analysis. Unlike many writers, Park does not devote a separate chapter to a review of literature on the subject; instead, she weaves a large number of concepts, ideas, and theoretical approaches into her text at various places, incorporating a diverse range of insights from previous works to support her analysis. One has to say that this does not always work. Overall, the book is at its best when it tells fascinating stories from the lives of the Korean diaspora in the Soviet Union, many of whom Park met herself and witnessed with her eyes. It is at its most difficult when it tries to tie these experiences to an eclectic body of anthropological, ethnographic, and philosophical writings. This reviewer sometimes found it difficult to see the relevance of certain concepts that Park borrows from other scholars. To cite one example, I did not find Park's reference to Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life" especially persuading, in part because she does not explain *what* Agambenian "bare life" was and *why* she defines the life of Koreans shortly after deportation to Central Asia as "bare life." According to Park, "Eating a 'rice' meal was expressed as the threshold for moving from a 'bare life' to a 'normal' life."⁶ Agambenian "bare life" was a variety of life that could be sacrificed, and hence made sacred, according to a Roman custom; he applied the concept within the context of Nazi extermination camps. At the very least, an explanation of how this relates to post-deportation Korean lives is necessary for even the reader familiar with Agamben's work to make sense of Park's use of his concept.

There are other problems in the book. First, there are sweeping generalizations, such as this one: "In post-Soviet Russia, with the crumbling of the old state enterprises, economic wealth is limited to natural resources such as oil and gas that are controlled by oligarchs and do not benefit the ordinary people."⁷ While this is true about some regions of post-Soviet Russia, it does not apply everywhere; even if it did, the manner in which this claim is made borders on a form of broad speculation that one is surprised to find in a scholarly work. Second, while Park claims to analyze Korean lives in Central Asia, this analysis

sometimes leads to flippant observations; one can only conclude that the author seems to have taken the testimonies of some of her interlocutors at face value. On page 102, she writes, “During 1998-99, there was violent conflict in Uzbekistan”; she does not specify *what* conflict she is talking about, nor does she dwell on its causes, outcomes or the identities of conflicting sides. As someone who witnessed the cited period in its entirety in Uzbekistan, I cannot recall any violent conflict in the country, except the terrorist attacks of February 16, 1999, which cannot be called “a violent conflict” by any stretch of the imagination. Even if there was such conflict, the author should have provided the readers with a more detailed explanation. Also, while the standard of English is good overall, there remain awkward sentences and phrases here and there in the text, and inconsistencies are also present (a Korean-language newspaper is called *Lenin Gichi* on page 119, while ten pages later it is transliterated as *Lenin Kichi*). Some sentences have no verb (on page 120, “The maintenance of rice collective farms...”), another sentence on page 120 uses a semicolon instead of a period, and the one that follows contains an error (“These village leaders became the chairman of the Soviet village...”). Such minor shortcomings should not have survived scrutiny by the editor’s pencil.

Most annoyingly for readers without a good knowledge of Russian, Park’s book is bestrewn with Romanized Russian words and phrases related to her topic. This in itself is permissible when an author has too many case-specific terms, or words without easy equivalents in the English language. The problem is that in Park’s case the author has the tendency to prioritize the Russian versions of even the terms and phrases that could easily have been rendered in English. This happens at the expense of the book’s flow, and will put off all but the most persistent reader. A Russian-speaking reader, on the other hand, will perhaps feel doubly irritated when she realizes that many of the terms are transliterated or even translated incorrectly. To provide a few examples: on page 89, *stikhinno* is both spelled and translated incorrectly—as “quietly”; on the same page, not only is *ustroilis’* translated incorrectly—“we were not given (*ustroilis*) proper jobs”; it also does not sit well in the English text, breaking up the sentence; and the word *trudolyubitel’nyi*

on page 115 does not exist in the Russian language (it should be *trudoliubivyi*). Such examples, unfortunately, are too numerous to list here. Finally, while the book contains images that will clearly entice and inform any non-Soviet reader, the quality of these printed photographs is remarkably bad. For a volume that is priced at €95, this is hardly acceptable.

Despite the above-mentioned imperfections, *The Displacement of Borders among Russian Koreans* is an innovative work that examines a topic that is little-researched in the English language, and thus will be a welcome addition to a growing number of works on transnational and trans-border exchanges, (forced) migrations, and identity politics in multi-ethnic empires such as the Soviet Union.

Notes

¹ Hyun Gwi Park, *The Displacement of Borders among Russian Koreans* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 18.

² *Ibid.*, 79.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.