*Forgotten People:*

*The Koreans of Sakhalin Island, 1945-1991*

Andrei Lankov

In the early spring of 1946, hundreds of Korean miners and fishermen came to the small port city of Korsakov, located on the southernmost part of Sakhalin island. Southern Sakhalin had just changed ownership: after 40 years of Japanese rule, its territory had been retaken by the Russians, so the local Japanese were moving back to their native islands. Koreans came to Korsakov because rumors were circulating that ships would soon arrive to take all Koreans from Sakhalin back home to the southern provinces of newly independent Korea. Those who came to Korsakov wanted to be the first to board these ships. However, the ships never came.

This was, in a sense, a sign of things to come. The Sakhalin Koreans found themselves trapped on the island in 1945 and for a long time they hoped for some miracle that would let them return to their homes. This miracle did happen eventually, but only when it was too late for most of them, and when their children and grandchildren had completely different ideas about how life should be lived.

The present article is based largely on material collected by the author during a trip to Sakhalin in 2009. In recent years local historians have produced a number of high-quality studies of the Sakhalin Korean community and its history. Unfortunately, these thorough and interesting studies are not well-known outside the island, even in Russia, let alone overseas. This article is based on notes and materials provided by Sakhalin historians and activists and on various publications. Of special significance were my talks with Natalia Liede (chairwoman of the Korean Cultural Association), Viktoria Bia (editor of the local Korean newspaper), Mikhail Vysokov (professor of Sakhalin State University) and Anatoly Kuzin.[[1]](#footnote-1) I am much indebted to these people.

\* \* \* \*

In 1905, after Russia’s defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, the large (nearly one thousand kilometers long) island of Sakhalin, previously under the Russian jurisdiction, was divided between Russia and Japan. The victorious Japanese took the southern half. The island had large coal deposits and abundant fisheries as well as large forests, so it was of considerable value to the resource-poor Japanese empire. Developmental projects, however, needed cheap labor—labor that was found in Korea, then a colony of Japan.

The first Koreans appeared on the island around 1900. Beginning in the 1930s they began to arrive in growing numbers. At first it was a voluntary migration, Koreans being attracted by the high wages offered there. Indeed, around 1940 a Sakhalin coal miner could make 80–100 yen a month, a fortune for a Korean countryside lad who would be happy to get 15–20 yen a month back home. Initially these high salaries were indeed paid. But when the military situation began to deteriorate, obligatory “savings” were introduced. To this day descendants of those miners remain locked in a legal battle with the Japanese companies and banks involved, trying to recover this withheld money.

In the early 1940s even more Korean laborers began to arrive on the island, this time as a mobilized workforce. They were usually employed in the mines as well, where they had to work under increasingly dangerous conditions, producing coal for the empire.

By 1945 there were some 23,500 Koreans on the island. The population of Japanese Sakhalin was 380,000, so Koreans constituted some 6–7% of the total.[[2]](#footnote-2) The vast majority of these people came from what was to become South Korea. Few of them intended to stay on the island for more than a few years.

In those days many Japanese looked down on Koreans with racist disdain and a great deal of suspicion. It was widely believed that Koreans tended to have communist sympathies and might be even secretly siding with the Russians. It is a sad irony of history that in the Soviet Russia at the same time Koreans were also seen with suspicions as potential Japanese sympathizers. (The forced relocation of all ethnic Koreans from the Soviet Far East in 1937 was largely caused by the Soviet authorities’ worries about their loyalties in the increasingly likely event of a war with Japan.)

These suspicions led to an outpouring of violence when the USSR finally entered the war against Japan in August 1945, the local Koreans being attacked by members of Japanese ultra-nationalist militias in the middle of that same month. The zealots believed that local Koreans were ready to serve the advancing Russian forces as guides and were secretly providing intelligence to the Soviet command.

The worst violence occurred in the small Korean village of Mizuho. The entire population of the village, 27 people including many children, was slaughtered with utmost cruelty by their Japanese neighbors, most of them youngsters intoxicated with nationalist propaganda. There were other outbreaks of violence as well across the island.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Russian military took control over the area in less than two weeks and immediately made it clear that a large population transfer was going to happen—much in line with the established practice of the post-WWII era when changing borders usually meant forced relocation of the population. The local Japanese, whether they wanted to or not, were required to leave the island within the next few years. Throughout the period 1946–1948 some 357,000 Japanese passed through large camps in the southern part of Sakhalin and then boarded ships for Japan.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The local Koreans, meanwhile, learned that they, unlike the Japanese, would not be allowed to leave the island. It is not clear why the Soviet authorities initially made this decision. It is often argued that the major reason was the political impossibility of allowing these people to go to US-controlled Korea. The decision about the fate of the Sakhalin Koreans, however, seems to have been made in early 1946, when the future of Korea was by no means clear.

In spite of efforts by Sakhalin historians, no document explaining the rationale behind this decision has yet been found. Nonetheless, it appears plausible that the initial motive was not political, but economic: like their Japanese predecessors, the new Soviet masters of the island needed labor. In spite of government propaganda and rather generous incentives, few Russians were willing to move to Sakhalin, and many of those who did could not adjust to its harsh conditions. The local Koreans already living there—who, unlike the Japanese, were not perceived as an incurably hostile group—were therefore seen as an ideal source of labor. The industry of Sakhalin was then based on coal mining, fishing and logging, with timber being used for paper production. In all these industries, a large part of the unskilled and semi-skilled labor was provided by the Koreans, who were already familiar with the local climate and conditions.

Soon afterwards, a change in the political situation made repatriation to the southern part of the Korean peninsula politically impossible: Korea was divided, and under no circumstances would the Soviet authorities tolerate a large transfer of population to the “capitalist hell” of the South.

In the late 1940s, when the Japanese were boarding the ships that would take them home, some Koreans tried to pass as Japanese and sneak aboard, but it seems that almost no one succeeded. The Soviet officials in charge of repatriating the Japanese were reminded by their superiors to guard against attempts by Koreans to slip onto the ships.[[5]](#footnote-5) Some elder Koreans told this author that a small number of Koreans did manage to embark for Japan (and then, presumably, to South Korea) using the havoc and anarchy of September and October 1945, when some adventurous skippers were willing to cross the narrow strait at night and take fee-paying passengers to Japan without asking questions. Nonetheless, it seems that the Soviet authorities generally succeeded in separating the Japanese from the Koreans and preventing the latter from leaving the island.

In rare cases of mixed families, the Japanese spouse was allowed to leave Sakhalin if that was his/her wish. All Korean family members, however, had to stay in the USSR, so the Japanese spouse had to abandon them in order to leave. Unlike all other ethnic Japanese, the Japanese spouses of Koreans were also given the right to stay on the island with their Korean family if such was their choice. Nearly all the Japanese who were allowed to stay on Sakhalin after 1950 (there were some 700–800 of them) were spouses of Koreans or children from mixed marriages.

Facing grave labor shortages, the Soviet government decided to recruit more Korean workers in North Korea, then still technically under Soviet military administration. In the late 1940s a few tens of thousands of North Koreans signed up to work in the Soviet Far East; at some points in the late 1940s and early 1950s their numbers on Sakhalin alone exceeded 10,000 (about a third of the entire Korean community). It was assumed that these workers, usually employed in the fishing industry, would return home once their contracts expired, typically after one to three years. Some were indeed sent back home by 1950, but then the Korean War intervened and prevented further returns. According to a 1952 document, 9,500 North Korean workers and their family members lived on the island at the time.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The majority of Sakhalin Koreans, natives of the provinces of southern Korean, looked upon these new arrivals from the North with some suspicion. The greatest degree of suspicion, however, was reserved for another, much smaller group: the so-called “continental Koreans” who also arrived on the island from Central Asia in the late 1940s.

From the very beginning, the Soviet authorities felt insecure about the presence of large numbers of Koreans, none of whom spoke Russian or had been indoctrinated into the ways of Soviet society. To control the community, but also to facilitate interaction between Korean workers and Russian managers and to provide the Korean population with basic services, bilingual translators, educators and journalists were needed.

Logically enough, such people were found in Central Asia, where there was a large Korean community, then numbering around 200,000. They were descendants of farmers who had escaped from northern Korea before 1917. They initially settled near Vladivostok, but in 1937 the entire Korean population was moved to Central Asia. Despite the cruelty of this measure and the subsequent period of discrimination, the “continental Koreans” were remarkably loyal to the Communist system; those who were not wisely kept their mouths shut. Needless to say, they were thoroughly Soviet in their education and worldview, and usually spoke fluent Russian.

The Soviet government accordingly selected some 2,000 politically reliable Koreans in Central Asia and sent them to Sakhalin to reeducate the local community in the true Soviet spirit. These “continentals” became school teachers and translators and administrators and clerks, police officers and KGB agents, editors of the local Korean language newspaper and officials in the bodies which dealt with the Koreans.

Not unsurprisingly, many members of the island community were not particularly eager to be re-educated. The “continentals” met with disdain and hostility which remained palpable until the 1980s. They were seen as agents of an authority system which the majority of Sakhalin Koreans were not happy with. Actually, if one takes into account not only the serious tensions between the two Korean communities but also the significant cultural and linguistic differences that separated them, it becomes difficult to talk about one Soviet Korean community. There were in fact two such communities: one that included the Koreans of Central Asia, and another, much smaller, that included the Koreans of Sakhalin island.

After the San Francisco Treaty was signed in April 1952, the Japanese government formally stripped all Koreans and Taiwanese of Japanese citizenship. This decision, which had a major impact on the Korean community in Japan, also influenced the Sakhalin Koreans: they officially became stateless.[[7]](#footnote-7) They had lost their Japanese citizenship and were not allowed to become citizens of the USSR or of any Korean state.

This resulted in considerable legal difficulties, for it was not easy to live in the USSR as a stateless person. Such a person had to go to a police station every three months to get his residence permit extended. Any trip outside one’s native town or district required a special police permit, with the application for such a permit having to be lodged at least three days before the intended journey. Until 1956 it was also impossible for stateless Sakhalin Koreans to attend a college; after 1956 they were allowed only to enter a local pedagogical college. For a few years in the late 1940s they were not even allowed to marry citizens of the Soviet Union: for a period in the late 1940s and early 1950s Soviet law forbade marriages to foreign citizens, and Sakhalin Koreans had been officially made foreign. In some cases, “alien” Koreans were forcefully relocated from the vicinity of important military installations. And last but not least, they were ineligible for nearly all managerial jobs and were barred from joining the Communist Party, a prerequisite for any successful administrative career until 1991. It goes without saying that they could not travel overseas, since, being stateless persons, no government would issue them a passport. Even travel outside the island needed permits which were remarkably difficult to arrange.

In 1953 the Soviet authorities finally decreed that Koreans would be allowed to take up Soviet citizenship if they wished. This offer initially had few takers; the Sakhalin Koreans were remarkably reluctant to naturalize. While most still wanted to return to their homes in South Korea, they had learned enough about the Soviet system by this time to understand that once they took Soviet citizenship, they would probably lose any chance of ever leaving the country. Until the late 1960s the Soviet government did not allow its citizens to go overseas for permanent settlement. Any attempt to do so was treated as a serious crime.

At the same time, the legal inconveniencies of the Sakhalin Koreans’ statelessness did not worry them that much. Most of the first generation Koreans were unskilled laborers who seldom needed to leave their towns and villages and were not qualified for any managerial job.

According to a 1958 Soviet internal document, of some 32,000 Koreans then living on the island, 6,891 had North Korean citizenship (they were workers and the children of workers recruited by the Soviet military administration of North Korea in the late 1940s), while some 3,000 were holders of Soviet passports (these were overwhelmingly “continental Koreans,” officials and educators, sent to the island from Central Asia). All others—22,184—were stateless.[[8]](#footnote-8) They believed that this was a way to eventually return home. The Korean Armistice of 1953, the normalization of the relations between Soviet Union and Japan in 1956 and other international events heightened these expectations about repatriation.

A small number of Koreans did indeed manage to leave in the late 1950s. As mentioned above, during the mass expulsion of the Japanese population in the late 1940s, some Japanese spouses of local Koreans were allowed to stay with their families (no Korean was allowed to accompany his or her Japanese spouse during the first population transfer of the late 1940s). In 1956 the Soviet government agreed to let Koreans follow their Japanese family members if the latter choose to go to Japan. A few hundred people left at this time, including 294 “stateless” Koreans. Among these was Pak No-hak, who later became an unofficial representative of Sakhalin Koreans in Japan. He was married to a Japanese woman.

Meanwhile, the economics of the Sakhalin community began to change. While most Koreans still worked in mining and logging, in the late 1950s many of them discovered a new, profitable activity requiring neither citizenship nor education, only a lot of hard labor and persistence: small-scale vegetable farming.

The Sakhalin food situation in the 1950s was remarkably bad. A professor of Sakhalin University, whose childhood was spent on the island in the 1950s, told me recently: “We would not have starved without the Koreans, perhaps, but we would have had to sustain ourselves on the almost uneatable stuff they used to ship here from the continent. You cannot imagine the disgusting taste of dried potatoes and dried onions which used to be our staple diet before the Korean farms began to flourish.” Indeed, Russian farmers, unused to the peculiarities of the local climate and soil, could not produce sufficient quantities of fresh food, especially under the notoriously inefficient system of the “collective farms.”

It was not legally possible to establish large private farms in those days, but Koreans nevertheless managed to get exceptional harvests from the small plots which they could privately own. By the 1960s a majority of Korean women (and many men) spent their days working on these tiny but efficient farms. They thus earned much respect from the locals—and also money which was soon invested into the education of their children, the next generation of Sakhalin Koreans.

Meanwhile, the first generation of southerners, then still in their 40s and 50s, badly wanted to return to their native lands in the southern part of Korea. The Soviet authorities would not allow such large-scale resettlement to South Korea, but they had a different attitude toward those Koreans who had arrived on Sakhalin in the late 1940s from North Korea. The authorities wanted them to leave. From 1954 onward instructions were frequently sent to the local police to persuade former North Korean contract workers that it would be a good idea for them to go home.

These attempts at persuasion found a good deal of support in Pyongyang. At around the same time, officials at the North Korean consulate in the port city of Nakhodka near Vladivostok became remarkably active on the island. (Vladivostok, being a naval base, was then off limits to foreign diplomats.) Obviously, North Korean diplomats and spies were encouraged by their recent political success in Japan. Japan had a large Korean population, many of whom—much like Sakhalin Koreans—were recent migrants from South Korea. The North Korean agencies succeeded in persuading them to choose North Korean citizenship and for two or three decades the Japanese-Korean community remained surprisingly loyal to Kim Il Sung’s regime. Their association, Soren (or Ch’ongruyon), became a powerful state within a state which often broke Japanese laws with impunity and provided the North Korean regime with considerable funds and valuable intelligence. In the late 1950s and early 1960s Pyongyang also succeeded in luring some 95,000 ethnic Koreans from Japan to North Korea.

It is difficult nowadays to believe that North Korea, a brutal and impoverished dictatorship, once enjoyed great popularity among Asian countries and among Korean communities overseas. The fact remains, however, that starting around 1960 North Korea—due partially to its actual achievements but also to the remarkable skills of its propaganda arms—was seen as a beacon of progress in many Asian countries. The Sakhalin Korean community did not avoid this temptation, and for a brief time it appeared that Sakhalin Koreans were eager to side with Pyongyang and perceived North Korea as their ‘true motherland.’

North Korean diplomats and intelligence agents worked hard to persuade “stateless” Koreans to choose North Korean citizenship. They insisted that ultimately “Korea is one,” and that it would not matter in which province of the native country a person lived because unification—as they assured—was just around the corner. These efforts met with some success. In the late 1950s Sakhalin Koreans came to prefer North Korean rather than Soviet citizenship. For example, in 1958 the Sakhalin police office surveyed the local “stateless” Korean population (that is, Koreans who originally came from the South). According to the survey, 9,836 said that if given the choice they would prefer to remain without citizenship, 6,346 opted for North Korean passports, and only 1,008 expressed the wish to become citizens of the Soviet Union.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Between 1956 and 1962 some four thousand Sakhalin Koreans moved to Kim Il Sung’s “paradise on earth.” This number included few formerly stateless Koreans who had taken DPRK citizenship.

At the same time, North Korean agents began to create a semi-clandestine network which they hoped would separate local Koreans from Soviet influence so that they could be redeemed as “loyal soldiers of the Dear Leader.” The “study groups” (haksǔpcho) that were formed looked innocuous at first. They taught Korean language, history and culture—thoroughly mixed with North Korean propaganda, of course. Soon, however, these groups began to change. Pro-Soviet Koreans who were present were pushed aside and sometimes subjected to violent attacks and a clandestine pro-Pyongyang network began to emerge.

It did not last. First, the Soviet Union was no Japan; the KGB would not tolerate a Ch’ongruyon-type organization on Soviet soil. Despite the official rhetoric, relations between Moscow and Pyongyang in the 1960s were in fact tense, even hostile. Second, Sakhalin Koreans themselves soon grew disillusioned about North Korea. Stories about life in North Korea began to filter out in the late 1950s, and in no time the idea of repatriation to North Korea lost its appeal. The last group, some 500 people, left the island for North Korea in 1962. Since then, no one wanted to follow. By the mid-1960s few had doubts that life in the USSR, however poor and restricted it might be, was still free and affluent compared to what awaited in Kim Il Song’s alleged “paradise on earth.” Three former Sakhalin Koreans who made the mistake of going to the North staged a bold escape back across the Soviet border. They were allowed to regain their Soviet citizenship (one of them eventually became a journalist for Moscow radio). Others who could not escape smuggled letters out which left no doubt about how North Koreans really lived.

North Korea therefore became decisively unpopular among Sakhalin Koreans. As an elder Korean intellectual told me: “Frankly, we were not proud of being Korean until the late 1980s. Everybody then thought of North Korea as the sole Korea, and people here in Sakhalin knew very well what an awful place it was.” The North Korean mirage, briefly attractive in the late 1950s, in short collapsed. However, it had an unintended consequence later, in the 1970s, when this short-lived infatuation with Kim Il Sung’s regime was used by the authorities as a tool to silence emerging opposition on the island.

In 1974 a sudden change in the domestic and international situation led to a revival of hopes for repatriation, which by that time were almost dead. The USSR was by then far more liberal (and more affluent, for that matter) than at any point in its history. In the 1970s the Soviet government began to allow Jews to leave the country, signaling a change in the Soviet approach to emigration, which had hitherto been uncompromisingly negative. The Japanese government, meanwhile, stated in 1974 that it would accept those Sakhalin Koreans who would be allowed to leave by the Soviet authorities. Surprisingly, this offer was taken by Moscow.

It was initially assumed that the numbers of potential emigrants would be small, perhaps in the dozens. The younger generation of Koreans, after all, were well adapted to the new life and were doing well. But things then took another turn: to the embarrassment of Moscow, hundreds and then thousands of Sakhalin Koreans expressed a desire to apply. In some cases it seems that the Confucian family ethic was at work: while the younger generation did not really want to go, they were ready to obediently follow their parents for whom the return to the native lands was a long-cherished dream. At any rate, it was a potential humiliation. The North Koreans also put great pressure on Moscow, demanding that the process be stopped. To complicate things further, relations with Japan deteriorated when in 1976 a Soviet air force pilot defected to Japan with his new fighter jet in 1976. Late that same year the earlier decision was accordingly reversed: the Soviet authorities declared that no repatriations would take place.

This came as a shock to many older Koreans whose cherished dream suddenly collapsed after being so close to realization. Sakhalin, like most of the Soviet countryside, was habitually docile in matters of politics, but this time a spontaneous “repatriation movement” began to unfold. In late 1976 the family of To Man-sang, who lived in the small town of Korsakov on the southern coast of the island, took a desperate step: they staged a demonstration in front of the local Party office, holding placards demanding: “Let us go!” The Soviet Union of the late 1970s was a relatively liberal place compared to what it had been in Stalin’s time, but it was still not as liberal as, say, South Korea under the “iron-fisted rule” of General Pak. The Korsakov demonstration constituted a dangerous and unprecedented challenge to Moscow. The Soviet authorities reacted swiftly.

Unfortunately for them, To Man-sang and his family held North Korean citizenship, even though they had originally come to Sakhalin from the South. Available documents do not clarify when and how they acquired it. It seems that they were among those Sakhalin Koreans who took North Korean citizenship in the late 1950s, being driven by nationalist feelings. If so, it was a bad decision. In early 1977 To Man-sang and his family were extradited to North Korea as “undesirable aliens.” They were soon followed by three other families of prominent repatriation activists. Throughout 1977, 40 Sakhalin Koreans were sent—essentially as prisoners, under armed guard—to the border railway station of Khasan, where they were handed over to the North Korean authorities.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The Soviet government saved itself from the embarrassment of imprisoning people whose only crime was a desire to return to their native lands. At the same time, everybody understood: had the activists been tried in the USSR, they would have received a few years of imprisonment at the worst, whereas sending them to North Korea likely meant a sentence of death—death not just for them, but for their families too. Indeed, in 1977 North Korea was an exceptionally brutal dictatorship. The authorities there were not gentle with people who, although North Korean citizens, had openly expressed the wish to go to South Korea—and even worse, who had started a movement which nearly resulted in a serious loss of face for Pyongyang. At best, such “traitors” would be sent to a prison camp. More likely, they were immediately put to death. After 1990, the families of those sent to North Korea made inquiries along with concerned NGOs and official Soviet agencies about the fate of these people. Needless to say, Pyongyang did not respond.

The story terrified a community whose members by that time had no illusions about North Korea. The repatriation movement instantly died. An activist’s son explained to me the position of his father: “My father once told me: ‘I would perhaps not be that afraid of prison. But they could send me to North Korea, together with all of you. And that would be much, much worse than going to prison. North Korea is a hell.’ So my father dropped out.”

Meanwhile, the community at large was changing. Once the hopes of repatriation diminished and the Pyongyang mirage collapsed, the Sakhalin Koreans began to take Soviet citizenship. It liberated their children from manifold restrictions: being Soviet citizens, they could enter the best schools and occupy almost any job. Some discrimination persisted, however. It was an open secret that only people born Soviet citizens would be normally eligible for the most prestigious and/or sensitive jobs. Nonetheless, compared to the position of a stateless person, this change in status meant a dramatic improvement in available career prospects—and most good jobs were not seen as security-sensitive anyway.

Those who had acquired North Korean citizenship during the short period of pro-Pyongyang sentiment, or who had it from the beginning as former recruited workers, faced a major obstacle. In order to apply for Soviet citizenship, they had to formally renounce their North Korean citizenship and produce a proper certificate from the North Korean consulate. Since such were certificates never issued, Soviet officials devised a clever way to get around this uncompromising stance of the North Korean officialdom. They advised applicants to send their North Korean passports to the consulate by registered mail. The postal receipt had to contain a brief description of the envelope contents: a valid North Korean passport. After receiving no reply from the consulate for six months, the proper paperwork could then be processed. By the early 1980s the majority of Sakhalin Koreans were neither stateless persons nor overseas citizens of the DPRK. They were Soviet citizens—although their loyalty, to be frank, was not always perfect.

Signs of assimilation were increasingly apparent in the island community beginning in the 1960s. In 1945 few if any Korean could utter a word of Russian. Those who came to the island from North Korea in 1946–1949 to work in the fishing and timber industries did not have a much better command of the language. For a decade or two the Sakhalin Korean community therefore could function in Korean only.

In the 1950s, most Korean children on Sakhalin attended Korean-language schools. In the post-war Soviet Union, still a very poor place, it took a major effort to provide these schools with textbooks—either translated from Russian or specially written and then printed—and teaching materials, but it was done. A junior college was also maintained on the island in order to train teachers for the Korean-language schools. Until the early 1960s, Korean Culture House operated in the island’s administrative center. For a while, even a small Korean theater existed on the island. North Korean films were widely screened, and in some cases Korean subtitles were prepared for Russian language films.

In 1951 a Korean-language newspaper called *Lenin-ui kil-lo*, “Following Lenin’s Path,” began publication on the island. It was generously subsidized by the administration and was published five times a week from 1952, with a circulation of 10,000 to 12,000. Sakhalin radio stations made regular Korean-language broadcasts as well.

In 1963–1964, however, a major change too place: all Korean schools were closed and the teachers and students were transferred to Russian schools. This step is often described as an attempt at forced Russification, but talks with elder Koreans have made this author skeptical. Witnesses insist that the major force behind the switch to Russian-language education were the Koreans themselves.

By the mid-1960s the Korean community on Sakhalin had greatly changed. While its elder members still hoped to return home, the younger generation had different ideas. To them, Russian Sakhalin and not South Korea was their home. In many cases, their parents also changed their minds, for like Koreans worldwide they highly valued education and the jobs associated with education. From 1956 even stateless Koreans could be accepted into a local college, and very soon they came to be overrepresented among the most successful students.

A Russian-language education, however, was necessary to increase the chances of success in a Russian-speaking environment. Graduates of Korean middle schools had problems with advanced education. Had their parents wanted their children to become fishermen or miners or vegetable farmers, they perhaps would not have minded. But they had more ambitious plans, to become engineers, doctors and professors, and that required that their children be taught in Russian. For an aspiring engineer or lawyer, learning Korean was essentially a waste of time. Few therefore endeavored to do so.

Even after the switch to Russian-language education, the Korean cultural sphere nevertheless survived on the island thanks largely to generous government subsidies. This was an interesting peculiarity of Soviet policy. On the one hand the state encouraged Russification, while on the other it spent large sums supporting minority languages and cultures—even when the minorities in question did not show much interest in their supposed ‘heritage.’

Despite these efforts, younger generations of Sakhalin Korean were being increasingly assimilated into Russian culture by the end of the Soviet era. According to the 1970 census, 28,000 of some 35,000 Sakhalin Koreans listed Korean as their primary language. In 1989 the figure had fallen to 13,000. In other words, by 1990 some two-thirds of Sakhalin Koreans had limited or no knowledge of their ancestral language.

\* \* \* \*

What has happened to the Sakhalin Korean community in a new Russia since the end of the Soviet Union?

For Sakhalin, the disintegration of the Soviet system in 1991 was a mixed blessing. Initially, the island experienced a wave of enthusiasm for democracy and market economy. The events of the early 1990s, however, dealt a harsh blow to the region, which depended heavily on government subsidies. Incomes shrank and unemployment became the norm.

It thus comes as no surprise that nowadays many locals long for the lost stability of the Soviet era. A large statue of Lenin still dominates the main square of Yuzhnosakhalinsk (and incidentally, the above-mentioned Korean candidate ran for office on the Communist Party ticket). Only in the early 2000s did the economic situation begin to improve, thanks largely to an oil boom: rich oil and natural gas deposits were discovered in the seas around the island.

For the Korean community, perestroika meant the “opening” of South Korea, land of their ancestors. Beginning in the late 1980s stories about South Korea’s material prosperity and technological success were widely reported in the press—and enthusiastically retold by Koreans. Visits to Seoul soon became commonplace. Nowadays, Asiana operates daily flights to the island.

These contacts brought new employment opportunities, but also a new self-perception. For decades, Sakhalin Koreans saw North Korea as “their country”—and everybody knew that it was a destitute dictatorship. The “discovery” of South Korea in the late 1980s, after the 1988 Olympics, changed this perception. Cultural associations, language classes, national dance troupes and similar organizations flourished in the new environment. For a time people were saying that a general revival of Korean culture and language was just around the corner.

Finally, in the late 1990s, persistent efforts by Korean activists and their supporters in Japan, South Korea and other countries helped to solve the community’s oldest problem. Japan and Korea jointly funded the construction of a special apartment complex near Incheon. This complex houses those elder Koreans who wish to return to Korea. Applicants have to have been born before 1945 to be eligible for this program, which entitles returnees to normal South Korean social benefits and an old age pension. By January 2009 there were 2,300 elder Sakhalin Koreans residing in this apartment complex. They had finally realized the dream which once was so important to Sakhalin Koreans.

Meanwhile, their children and grandchildren have done remarkably well at adjusting to the new life on the island, with Koreans nowadays being overrepresented among Sakhalin’s professional elite. When judged by education level and income, Sakhalin’s Koreans were very successful in the closing years of the Soviet Union and they have become even more successful since its demise. The post-Soviet social transformation meant that old restrictions became irrelevant. The quiet discrimination disappeared as well.

Contrary to earlier expectations, however, this success has not translated into a revival of Korean culture. In the early 1990s many young Koreans began to study their ancestral language but nearly all of them eventually gave up. For native speakers of Russian, learning Korean is exceedingly difficult, and fluency in Korean does not help the average inhabitant of Sakhalin that much. Younger Koreans therefore tend to make a rational choice: they prefer to study English if they decide to take up a second language, or Japanese if they want a challenge. (Japanese business is much present on the island.) It is telling that in the last few years the Korean-language department of Yuzhnosakhalinsk State University has struggled to find enough applicants to fill its quota of fully subsidized students—that is, students who study for free. Most of Sakhalin’s Koreans are now becoming Russians—albeit a particular kind of Russian, with intense sympathies towards South Korea and strong anti-Pyongyang feelings, and also with a love for seafood generously spiced with chili pepper.

*Andrei Lankov is professor at Kookmin University in Seoul and the author of several books on North Korean history and politics.*

1. The works of Professor Anatoly Kuzin are of exceptional importance for the history of the Sakhalin Koreans. A high-level official in the Soviet period, he became a prominent historian and a true master of document-based research. Most of the statistics in this article are taken from a collection of historical documents he recently published: A.T. Kuzin, *Sahalinskiie koreitsy: Istoriia i sovremennost* (Sakhalin Koreans: Past and present) (Yuzhnosahalinsk: Yuzhnosahalinskoe izdatelstvo, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Istoria Sahalina i Kurliskih ostrovov* (The history of Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands) (Yuzhnosahalinsk: Yuzhnosahalinskoe izdatelstvo, 2006), p. 459. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Mizuho massacre is not widely known outside the island. A detailed study of this tragic affair can be found in Konstantin Gaponnko, *Tragediia derevni Midzuho* (The tragedy of Mizuho village) (Yuzhnosahalinsk: Rif, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Istoria Sakhalina i Kurliskih ostrovov*, p. 460. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A.T. Kuzin. *Sahalinskiie koreitsy: istoriia i sovremennost* (Sakhalin Koreans: Past and present) (Yuzhnosahalinsk: Yuzhnosahalinskoe izdatelstvo, 2006), pp. 122–123. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kuzin, p. 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On the “citizenship circular” and its impact on the legal standing of the Korean community, see David Chapman, *Zainichi Korean: Identity and Ethnicity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 69–70. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kuzin, pp. 196–197. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kuzin, p. 193–194. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kuzin, p. 268–272. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)