The Long-Delayed Repatriation of the Sakhalin Koreans:
Cold War Challenges and Resolution, 1945-1992

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Abstract

During World War II (WWII), tens of thousands of Koreans were forcibly mobilized to Karafuto (southern Sakhalin Island) to serve as labourers in Japan’s wartime economy. When the war ended in August 1945, the Soviet Union occupied the region and the Koreans ceased to be Japanese colonial subjects. While 99% of the Japanese in Karafuto were repatriated by April 1950, the Koreans became trapped in a Cold War standoff between the Soviet Union, North Korea, and South Korea that was not fully resolved until the 1990s. As such they became double victims of global forces that paid little heed to their calls for justice and humane treatment.

This thesis explores the complicated process by which the Sakhalin Koreans were long prevented from returning to their homeland. The analysis focuses upon the geopolitical and socio-economic repercussions of the Cold War in northeast Asia, most notably the complex triangular relationship between Moscow, Pyongyang, and Seoul. The thesis argues that postwar hardships and authoritarian governing structures in all three countries, the Korean War, and domestic and international concerns that took precedence over the resolution of injustices dating back to WWII, led to successive delays in the full resolution of the matter. The three central issues addressed in this thesis are: Cold War politics relating to divided Korea, the post-WWII economies of the Soviet Union and South Korea, and Soviet-South Korean relations after the introduction of perestroika, glasnost, and nordpolitik in the 1980s.1

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1 Perestroika (Russian, “restructuring”) and glasnost (Russian, “openness”) refer to a series of political, economic and social reforms introduced by the Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev in mid-1980s. Nordpolitik (German translation for “Northern Policy”) was South Korea’s foreign policy introduced by the
Keywords

“Sakhalin Koreans,” “Korean Repatriation,” “Cold War Politics,” “Post WWII Socio-Politics in South Korea,” “Post WWII Soviet-North Korean Alliance,” “North and South Korean rivalry,” “perestroika,” “South Korean nordpolitik,” “Soviet-South Korean Relations.”

President Roh Tae Woo in 1988 with efforts to reconcile and normalize relations with “northern countries” including the Soviet Union and China.
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Following the end of World War II, approximately 43,000 Koreans were stranded on the North Pacific island of Sakhalin, formerly known as Karafuto (樺太). With the defeat of Japan and collapse of the Japanese empire in August 1945, the island became a federal subject of Russia, and hence became part of the USSR. The Japanese residents of Sakhalin were quickly repatriated to mainland Japan, but with a few exceptions, the remaining Koreans were denied the same opportunity to go back to their homeland, and held on Sakhalin until 1989. Two main questions arise from this history. First, why did the Sakhalin Koreans’ repatriation take over four decades to resolve? Second, what factors in the late 1980s contributed to the breakthrough of the problem? This thesis will concentrate on the socio-political circumstances in Soviet Russia, South Korea and North Korea that acted as push and pull factors in relation to the Sakhalin Koreans’ repatriation, and propose an explanation of how the deadlock between the Soviet Union and South Korea subsequently came to be resolved. Overall, this thesis contends that the Sakhalin Koreans’ repatriation was hindered and delayed due to a complex ideological conflict between the Soviet Union, South Korea, and North Korea, as well as several important economic and political considerations in the three nations. The deadlock was broken after socio-economic reforms, namely Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost in 1985 and Roh Tae Woo’s nordpolitik in 1988, were introduced in Moscow and Seoul.

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2 At the Yalta Conference, February 1945, Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to Stalin’s territorial demand for the southern part of Sakhalin, which was then Karafuto, in return for the Soviet participation in the war against Japan on the side of the Allies. Wilson Centre, Digital Archive: International History Declassified, “Yalta Conference Agreement, Declaration of a Liberated Europe,” February 11, 1945, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116176
This thesis is structured around the exploration of three central topics: the impact of the Cold War and Korean War on the repatriation problem; the Soviet Union’s need for labourers on Sakhalin Island and its communist alliance with North Korea; and the impact of perestroika and nordpolitik on the Soviet Union and South Korea’s bilateral relations. These will be explored through an analysis of various primary and secondary sources. The former include diplomatic correspondence from Soviet and South Korean government officials, either translated into English or directly quoted from Korean, and South Korean newspaper articles. The latter include Soviet and South Korean scholars’ analyses of the socio-political and economic circumstances and transitions in South Korea, Soviet Union, and North Korea during the Cold War.

Thus far, the historiography of the Sakhalin Koreans mostly addresses their social life and humanitarian concerns relating to the marginalized diaspora. Woojeong Cho’s PhD thesis “The Homeland on the Move” (2014) and Yulia Din’s chapter “Dreams of Returning to the Homeland” (2015) provide a brief history and several testimonials of first- and second-generation Sakhalin Koreans in order to explore their ideas and expectations in relation to the issue of repatriation. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, a Russian scholar of Korean Studies, Andrei Lankov, published a number of reports, describing the hardships of Sakhalin Koreans as a minority group that was politically forced to settle in a foreign country for an extended period. The past and current living conditions of Sakhalin Koreans have been also reported upon by several Japanese social scientists, such as Tonai Yuzu and Fusako Tsunoda. Yet, barely any of these studies have addressed the subject from a historical point of view that grapples with “why” the community had to struggle for such a long time to return to their ancestral homeland, and “how” their lives and hopes of
repatriation were affected by international affairs far beyond their knowledge and control. The primarily focus of this thesis is the geo-political histories of post-WWII Soviet Union and South Korea as they relate to the above-stated “why” and “how.”

1.1 Historical Outline of the Sakhalin Korean Problem

Karafuto (樺太) was the name of the southern part of Sakhalin Island that was colonized by Japan after the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) until the end of World War II (WWII, 1939-1945). Located at the far eastern end of Russia, and approximately 40 km north of Japan, Sakhalin was the subject of Russia-Japan disputes since the mid-1800s because of the richness of its natural resource, such as timber, oil and gas. As per the Treaty of Portsmouth (1905), the southern part of the island became a colony of Japan and was renamed Karafuto, whereas the northern part remained Russian territory. In 1910, while intensive resource exploitation in Karafuto was in progress, Korea also became a Japanese colony, and several thousands of Koreans moved there either because they had been dispossessed of their land or for the opportunity of better employment.

Korean immigration to Karafuto increased significantly after Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in 1931. As Korea and Manchuria were industrialized and Japan’s economy became increasingly oriented towards military expansion, the country’s need for natural resource development became greater. Meanwhile, because of its harsh weather conditions and remote geographical location, finding additional labourers to work in Sakhalin was one
of the most significant challenges to developing that territory.3 To cope with the labour shortage, Japan created the National Mobilization Law (國家總動員法) in 1938, which enabled the government to direct Japanese labour resources to areas of the economy deemed vital to the war effort without parliamentary approval.4 The sweeping new law was further supplemented in 1939 by the National Service Draft Ordinance (國民徵用令), which authorized the government to forcibly mobilize colonial subjects, such as Koreans, for its war industries including the coal mines and lumber yards in Karafuto. Consequently, the Korean population in Karafuto almost doubled from 8,996 in 1939 to 16,056 in 1940, and increased further to 23,500 by 1945.5

On August 8, 1945, the USSR declared war on Japan and proceeded in short measure to occupy the entire Sakhalin Island, Manchuria, and Korea north of the 38th parallel. The repatriation of Japanese citizens from Soviet-controlled areas, including Sakhalin Oblast of Russia, began on November 27, 1946, under an agreement between the U.S. and USSR that defined repatriates as “Japanese prisoners of war and Japanese nationals.”6 On September 23, 1949, a repatriation office in Hokkaido reported that only 1,900 Japanese remained “on what had been Karafuto,” and on April 22, 1950, the Soviet

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Union declared the completion of the Japanese repatriation, with a report that a total of “218 ships [had] brought back 312,452 former Karafuto residents [to Japan].”\(^7\) Some 700 to 800 Japanese, most of whom were “spouses of Koreans or children from mixed marriages,” were allowed to move to Japan but chose to stay behind.\(^8\) Meanwhile, the Koreans who migrated to Karafuto as Japanese labourers, but were now liberated from Japan’s colonial rule and residents of the USSR, were completely excluded from the repatriation list.\(^9\)

The failure to repatriate the Sakhalin Koreans was a lingering irritant on Sakhalin and in Korea. Shortly after the war ended, Sakhalin officials reported to Moscow that Koreans were refusing to work, gathering in crowds, and demanding to be sent back to Korea.\(^10\) In December 1945, eighteen Korean coalminers who had been transferred to Japan in 1944 filed a petition to the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) to be reunited with their families who had been sent to Sakhalin. In response, SCAP sent the families’ repatriation request to the Soviet representative of the Allied Council.\(^11\) On February 17, 1947, the Head of the Soviet Council of Ministers’ Department of Repatriation Issues, Filipp Golikov, sent a letter to the Soviet Deputy Minister of Foreign

\(^9\) Japan refused to take responsibility for the Sakhalin Koreans, and the U.S. and USSR did not “regard these Koreans as Japanese nationals” based on the Cairo Declaration of November 1943. This agreement between Roosevelt, Churchill, and Jiang Jieshi outlined the Allies’ post-war goals, including that “in due course, Korea shall become free and independent.” Son, 8-9; Wilson Centre, Digital Archive: International History Declassified, “The Cairo Declaration,” November 26, 1943, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/122101
Affairs, Yakov Malik, to urge him to repatriate the 22,777 Koreans in Sakhalin. In October 1947, the Seoul-based Society to Achieve the Early Repatriation of the Sakhalin Koreans also pleaded with the U.S. military General McArthur to discuss the matter with the Soviet Union. For its part, the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) was not encouraging of the repatriation of the Sakhalin Koreans on the grounds that the economic condition of Korea was precarious because of the need to accommodate “1.5 million Koreans coming home from Japan.” Ultimately, all of the initiatives on behalf of the Koreans trapped on Sakhalin came to naught as Moscow refused all requests for repatriation, and “GHQ [General Headquarters, Tokyo] took no further action thereafter.”

A document from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) reveals that, on March 19, 1947, 233 Sakhalin Koreans were sent to Konan Port (흥남항) in northern Korea, which was under Soviet jurisdiction at the time. It is to be noted that this group represents only a fraction of the total who demanded repatriation: on September 25, 1947, the Telegraph Agency of Soviet Union reported that that 95% of the 40,000 Koreans on Sakhalin, including those who migrated there from other Soviet controlled areas, wished...

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13 Choi, 122-123.
14 Ibid.
15 Choi Ki-young also reports that the matter was revisited in 1949 when the GHQ was asked by the South Korean officials to “act as a mediator for negotiations with the Soviet Union,” but the GHQ advised that it had “not yet established diplomatic relations,” and Korea should “discuss the matter with the Soviet Union through mediation by a third country that had diplomatic relations with both countries.” Choi interprets it “same as declaring that the GHQ would not be involved in the matter of the Sakhalin Koreans.” Ibid., 123.
16 These returnees were required to transfer all their private properties to northern Korean government. Hence it can be assumed that the approval was an economic strategy only given to those who had enough wealth to make a contribution. Ibid.
to return home. Also, while the Soviet government had a plan to repatriate 23,298 more people to northern Korea between July and October 1948, it is estimated that 95% of the Sakhalin Koreans were originated from the southern part of Korea, which was under U.S. trusteeship at this time. As it happened, that plan was never executed, likely due to the geo-political and economic factors, which will be explored in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis. Instead, the Korean population on Sakhalin further increased between 1946 and 1949 as the Soviet Union recruited 26,000 workers from northern Korea.

From 1956, after the signing of Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration providing for the end of the state of war and restoration of diplomatic relations between Moscow and Tokyo, the Sakhalin Koreans who were married to Japanese were given permission to leave the island and migrate to Japan. Park No-Hak was one of the 479 Korean men who moved to Japan through this program. Shortly after arriving in Japan in 1958, Park formed a group “with about 20 other Sakhalin Korean repatriates,” called the Korean Association for Repatriation of Detained Karafuto Koreans. This civilian group and others that were inspired by Park’s activism continuously petitioned government agencies in South Korea, the Soviet Union, and Japan for the right of the Sakhalin Koreans to be repatriated. In the mid-1960s, South

17 For many Sakhalin Koreans, their idea of ‘home’ was “where their families had lived and ancestors had been buried.” Cho, 55; Din, 178.
18 “한-러 近現代 近現代秘史: 러시아文書보관委史料특집발굴 <34>, 사할린의韓人들 (1);” Din’s explanation for this pattern is that as the “main targets of Japanese labour recruitment and mobilization were people in the countryside, and the southern half of the peninsula was more rural,” southern Korea was impacted more heavily than the north. Din. 179.
19 Andrew Horvat, “Exiled Sakhalin Koreans Yearn to Go Home Again,” Los Angeles Times (February 02, 1986).
20 Cho, 31.
Korean newspapers such as *The Dong-A Ilbo* (동아일보) and *The Kyonghyang Shinmun* (경향신문) also began drawing attention to the issue.\(^{21}\) Yet, the Sakhalin Koreans were strictly forbidden by Soviet officials to leave the island due to the Soviet Union’s strict emigration policy.\(^{22}\) And for its part, the South Korean government did not give much consideration to the issue.

Then in the late 1980s, Soviet-South Korean relations changed dramatically, and the case for the Sakhalin Koreans’ repatriation gained diplomatic momentum. The issue was commented upon by the Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard A. Shevardnadze, during his first visit to Japan in 1987, and a further discussion took place in Moscow during a South Korean politician Youngsam Kim’s visit in 1989. That same year, the Sakhalin Koreans who possessed invitations from their families in South Korea gained approval for interstate family reunification and “individual returns.”\(^{23}\) From 1992, the government repatriation program was expanded to allow more Sakhalin Koreans to return, even those without family invitations, and with the government subsidy program, 3,411 Sakhalin

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\(^{21}\) In 1975, the Karafuto Trial was initiated by a group of 21 Japanese lawyers who asserted that “the Japanese government was legally responsible for Sakhalin Korean repatriation.” The trial lasted until 1989 “when the case was withdrawn with the last plaintiff being allowed to permanently return to South Korea.” Cho, 48-49.

\(^{22}\) *The Dong-A Ilbo* (동아일보) reported that the Japanese government granted entry permits to 411 Sakhalin Koreans between 1975 and 1983, but only three of them arrived in Japan because of the strict Soviet emigration policy. *The Dong-A Ilbo* (동아일보), “사할린僑胞3百92명歸國희망,” in Korean (June 04, 1983).

\(^{23}\) In 1987, the Japanese government began to provide funding “appropriated for the problem of Sakhalin Koreans,” and in 1990, Japan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs publicly apologized “for the tragedy in which these [Korean] people were moved to Sakhalin not of their own free will but by the design of the Japanese government and had to remain there after the conclusion of the war,” and provided additional 100,000,000 yen to “help family reunions of Koreans in Sakhalin.” Such funding has been defined as “humanitarian aid” that “deserves sympathy from Japan,” rather than as compensation. Cho, 60-61&82; Son, 11.
Koreans returned to South Korea between 1992 and 2009. Some of these repatriates could not fully adapt to life in a ‘new place’ and ultimately chose to return to Sakhalin; nevertheless, a total of 4,387 Sakhalin returnees were reported to be residing in South Korea at the end of 2016.

CHAPTER 2: Post WWII Politics and Economy

This chapter considers some of the broad geo-strategic factors that contributed to the Soviet, North Korean, and South Korean policymaking on the issue of the Sakhalin Koreans from the end of the WWII in 1945 until the mid-1980s. In particular, it explores how urgent reconstruction needs in all three countries as well as economic and political rivalries generated by the Cold War lead to the prioritization of national interests, and left virtually no room for consideration of the Sakhalin Koreans’ predicament.

2.1 Soviet Union

While no direct answer is available as to why the Sakhalin Koreans’ repatriation was delayed for such a long time, the post-WWII economy and political circumstances in the

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24 It is to be noted that, until 2008, the permission to live permanently in South Korea were given to only first-generation Sakhalin Koreans, defined as those born in the current region of South Korea during the Japanese occupation. As a result, many of the repatriates had to leave their spouses, children and other relatives behind in order to move back to their homeland. Also, in addition to the diminishing interest in repatriation started in the 1970s (see page 35), it needs to be considered that many of the first-generation Sakhalin Koreans decided not to move because of their health or financial concerns as they would have been at least in their late 60s by this time. Included in the subsidy program are two-people shared apartment and $400 monthly stipend. Cho, 94; Din, 187.

25 Woojeong Cho and Yulia Din’s writings provide several testimonials describing Sakhalin repatriates’ struggles with economic hardship, feeling of isolation and depression, cultural differences and South Koreans’ discriminatory perceptions and treatments towards them. Cho, 173-175 & 202-210; Din, 187-191; ionyang (온양신문), “영주귀국 사할린동포 국내 거주.정착 지원,“ in Korean (March 16, 2017).
Soviet Union can be identified as central causal factors. Specific issues in this regard are Moscow’s desire for communist expansionism and autarky, which were linked to the economic challenges and population loss from the war, as well as the Cold War rivalry with the U.S. Furthermore, Stalin’s military-focused dictatorship ran roughshod over the Soviet citizens’ human rights, especially in regard to minority populations, and continuing Cold War tensions throughout the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras limited the possibility of humanitarian talks across the ideological borders.

The most glaring impacts of WWII upon the USSR were a significant population loss and major economic dislocation. According to Harrison, the war “killed one in eight Soviet citizens, and destroyed one third of their national wealth.” The population loss, estimated at nearly 3 million, resulted in the Soviet government desperately wanting “women, even unmarried women, to bear as many children as possible, and changed the laws to encourage reproduction.” Moreover, things were made worse in 1946 by a massive harvest failure that cost the lives of 1.5 million people.

These problems aside, Stalin’s main focus was on the competition against the U.S., the other world superpower with an adversarial ideology and competing trusteeships in Germany and Korea. Stalin’s obsessive focus upon opposing the U.S. expansion was further intensified by the creation of U.S. Marshall Plan in 1948, which provided over $12

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27 Barbara Engel & Janet Martin, “Cold War and the Collapse of Communism (1945 to the Present),” in *Russia in World History* (Oxford University Press, June 2015), 112; The effort to increase Soviet population continued with the “Return to the Homeland” campaign in 1955, which “promoted a worldwide invitation to all emigres from Russia to return home” with a depiction that “the USSR was now a better place in which to live.” J.L.Black, *Canada in the Soviet Mirror: Ideology and Perception in Soviet Foreign Affairs, 1917-1991* (Carleton University Press, 1998), 23.
28 Harrison, 110.
billion to support the Western European countries’ post-WWII reconstruction. Stalin considered this as an “attempt to destroy the USSR and Communism,” and concluded that “war was inevitable as long as Capitalism existed.”

Hence, the core objective of postwar Soviet economic development was to strengthen its military power in preparation of a projected future war against the U.S., and with this goal in mind, Stalin worked to expand the communist influence in Europe, China, and Korea.

While the U.S. aid flowed outward to its friends and client states in Western Europe, Eastern European countries in the Soviet orbit were in a reverse situation; they were expected to contribute resources to support Soviet Russia’s recovery and communist expansionism. Kramer reports that, in the first decade after WWII, the “net outflow of resources from Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union was approximately $15 billion to $20 billion, an amount roughly equal to the total aid provided by the United States to Western Europe under the Marshall Plan.”

Many of these resources were invested in Russian defense industry programs such as “atomic weapons, rockets, jets and radar.”

Moscow also invested strategically in relationship building with northern Korea. Between 1945 and 1949, it provided US$50M to help the government of Kim Il Sung recover from Japanese colonialism and develop its economy based on the Soviet socio-economic models.

In 1947, Terentii Shtykov, then de facto head of the Soviet occupation of northern Korea, requested that Stalin send Soviet specialists to northern Korea.

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29 Angel & Martin, 236; Black, 235.
31 Harrison, 108.
“especially in the form of engineers to help them build their railroad” – adding the wording that “if the Koreans don’t receive aid from the Soviets, they’ll turn to the Americans.”

In April 1950, after Korea was officially divided into two countries with different regimes – the capitalist Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the communist Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) - Stalin agreed to support Kim Il Sung’s plan to invade South Korea and unify the peninsula under communist rule. Considering it “an opportunity to build on Communist success in Asia,” the Soviet Union participated in North Korea’s tactical planning, trained and equipped its army, and provided vital military resources such as “MiG-15 fighter pilots, radar operators, and anti-aircraft gunners.”

Stalin’s expansionist orientation was based upon the broader strategy of autarky, and the Eastern bloc was sealed off from the West both economically and socially. One consequence of this was that, internally, the Soviets had to follow the trend of Stalinist political economy that was “more centralized, militarized, secretive, and punitive than in the late 1930s.” As indicated earlier, Stalin believed he needed to maintain the Soviet sphere’s population and resources within the communist bloc for military and economic reasons. This translated into strict control over the flow of people and information within and beyond the bloc, obsessive surveillance of the population, and the ruthless persecution of dissidents and potential traitors. Hence, civilians within the Soviet sphere, including Sakhalin, possessed severely restricted freedom of speech and movement with regard to emigration to the ‘free’ world.

35 Harrison, 103.
When Khrushchev took over power in 1953, major reforms were made in the Soviet socio-political landscape. In February 1956, Khrushchev criticized and denounced Stalinism in his Community Congress speech, *On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences*, and the so-called ‘era of de-Stalinization’ began. As with his predecessor, Khrushchev continued trying to “overtake and surpass the United States economically.”

At the same time, the political repression of Soviet citizens was significantly alleviated, and attention began to be given to human rights within the Soviet bloc. Tens of thousands who had been imprisoned in Stalin’s Great Purge of 1936-38 were released, and efforts were made to “redirect resources from the military to human needs.” These included housing and healthcare, and supporting domestic consumer industries. Nation-wide civil and human rights movements also began to emerge with the focus on freedom of expression and the right to emigrate. These were new opportunities to openly participate in political activities.

In contrast to Stalinist efforts to seal off the communist bloc and pursue economic autarky, Khrushchev and his government attempted to ‘break the ice’ with the West by promoting peaceful co-existence with the U.S. Accordingly, they sent delegates to international peace conferences and other multilateral forum, and took the initiative in organizing such events within the Soviet sphere. For example, the World Youth Festival, held in Moscow in 1957, hosted nearly 34,000 people from 130 countries. This was a notable turning point in Soviet foreign policy that allowed non-Communist foreigners’ contact with Soviet citizens. It contributed directly to the negotiation of the Soviet-

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36 Ibid, 111.
37 Engel & Martin, 118.
American Cultural Agreement in 1958, according to which dancers, musicians, and students from both countries could take part in cultural exchange programs. In the summer of 1959, an American National Exhibition was held in Moscow, and the event was visited by approximately 250,000 Soviet citizens.\(^\text{38}\)

Despite these small steps toward détente, however, the Cold War continued apace. In the Far East, the USSR still recognized North Korea as the only legitimate state on the peninsula and channeled large amounts of financial and material aid to the regime in Pyongyang to help it recover from the Korean War. Specifically, between 1953 and 1959, the Kim Il Sung government received a total of 2.8 billion rubles in grants and credits from the USSR.\(^\text{39}\) In Southeast Asia, the Vietnam War grew into an increasingly heavy investment for both Moscow (the Soviet-supported Hanoi regime of North Vietnam) and Washington (the U.S.-backed Republic of Vietnam in the South). And in 1960, an American U-2 spy plane was shot down by the Soviet air force while conducting the aerial espionage. Consequently, despite Khrushchev’s willingness to increase cultural contacts with the West, there was no significant thaw in the Cold War standoff, leaving the predicament of the Sakhalin Koreans unchanged throughout Khrushchev’s tenure as Premier of the Soviet Union.

When Leonid Brezhnev succeeded Khrushchev in 1964, an era of economic, social and political stagnation began in the USSR and continued until his death in 1982. Brezhnev revoked Khrushchev’s liberal reforms and attempted to revive Stalinist

\(^{38}\) Gretchen Simms, “The 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow and the Soviet Artistic Reaction to the Abstract Art” (Diss., University of Vienna, October 2007), 3.

approaches to domestic and foreign policies. Under Khrushchev, Moscow’s relationship with Beijing deteriorated (lead to the Sino-Soviet split) and the alienation between the two communist giants continued under Brezhnev. The Soviet relationship with North Korea also became unstable as the latter skillfully exploited the Sino-Soviet split to its advantage. Nevertheless, Moscow remained a reliable source of aid to the Pyongyang regime. A Romanian diplomatic report from the early 1980s explains the triangular relationship between the Soviet Union, Communist China, and North Korea; “the DPRK’s political relations [are] better with the PRC than with the USSR,” but its “economic relations and commercial exchanges [are] better with the USSR than with China.”

It is noteworthy in regard to the Moscow-Pyongyang relationship that the USSR was reluctant to support North Korea’s dynastic succession of Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il, and also Pyongyang’s request to supply a nuclear power plant, something that had been insisted upon since the mid-1970s.

Clearly, Moscow did not want to see North Korea grow from a useful protégé into a potentially dangerous communist rival, as it had been the case with China. As indicated above, the Soviet economy suffered during the Brezhnev era. Economic growth began to slow in the early 1970s due to the radical inflation-fighting policies implemented by the Nixon government in 1971 (the Nixon Shock) and the 1973 oil crisis. Through all of the political and economic changes of the 1960s and 1970s, Brezhnev government prioritized heavy industry and military development over the

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production of consumer goods. The Vietnam War (1954-75) and Afghani War (1979-89) fed this prioritization of the military-industrial complex. The deteriorating relationships with Beijing and Pyongyang only further increased Moscow’s instinct to prioritize all things military. As before, this climate did not produce openings for improvement in the predicament of the Sakhalin Koreans.

2.2 North Korea

After Japanese colonial rule ended in August 1945, the northern half of the Korean peninsula was occupied by the Soviet Union, and a Stalinist communist government installed under the leadership of Kim Il Sung. For its part, the southern half of the peninsula was occupied by the U.S., setting up a Cold War rivalry across the 38th parallel. In this context, the Pyongyang regime regarded itself as the direct competitor of southern Korea’s capitalist model, with support of its two immense socialist neighbours; the Soviet Union and, after October 1949, the People’s Republic of China. The aforementioned Sino-Soviet split of 1960 complicated the pattern of northern Korea’s two key supports, while maintaining its position as a vital Soviet ally, but with improved bargaining power.

When Japanese colonial rule ended, northern Korea was left with well-developed heavy industry in mining, chemicals, steel and hydroelectric power. As Savada states, “the hydroelectric power and chemical plants were said to be second to none in Asia at the time

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42 As was a member of anti-Japanese guerillas since the early 1930s, he was already highly respected in the community as a charismatic nationalist. With such a reason, a Soviet officer sent a report to Moscow, and suggested “Kim Il Sung should be a leading candidate to head the Korean government.” A former Soviet military trainee Kim Il Sung was already devoted to Stalinism, and was familiar with the Soviet political system, language and culture. Wilson Centre, Digital Archive: International History Declassified, “Soviet Report on Communists in Korea, 1945,” https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114890.
in terms of both their scale and technology.” Although it lacked the entrepreneurial and engineering skills that had mostly been supplied by the Japanese workers in 1945, northern Korea had a better economic start than the south in terms of industrial infrastructure and access to natural resources.

With extensive financial and technical assistance from the Soviet Union, Kim Il Sung began northern Korea’s economic development based on the Soviet model of central planning and industrialization. From March 1946, a two-year economic program was implemented with emphasis upon heavy industry and military sector development. Existing major industries, which had been owned by the Japanese, were nationalized. A land reform policy was also introduced, and landlords were dispossessed of their land without compensation. As this resulted in many landlords and former collaborators of the Japanese fleeing to the south, the northern population of 22 million, which was half of southern Korea’s at the time of liberation, began to decline. North Korea’s population decreased further because of the aforementioned labour shifts to the Soviet Union in return for economic aid. Of the 26,000 northern Koreans who were recruited on temporary labour contracts by the Soviet military authorities between 1946 and 1949, 20,891 were sent to work in “fishery, timber, and pulp industries” in Sakhalin.

In 1948, the two superpower trusteeship of the Korean peninsula fostered the birth of two new states with contrasting ideologies and social systems. In May, the southern half of the 38th parallel became the capitalist Republic of Korea with Rhee Syngman as...
president, while four months later, in September, the northern half became the communist Democratic People’s Republic of Korea under Kim Il Sung. From the outset, Kim Il Sung excoriated South Korea as a puppet state of the U.S., and devoted his efforts to expanding the North Korean army, and launching mass bond drives to purchase Soviet weaponry.\footnote{Savada ed., 39.}

In June 1950, based upon Kim Il Sung’s desire to reunify the peninsula under his communist regime, the North Korean army backed by Chinese and Soviet troops invaded South Korea and initiated the Korean War. After involving 23 countries in the conflict and producing over 1.2 million casualties, the Korean War was brought to a cease fire with an armistice agreement on July 27, 1953.

Up until 1949, the Soviet Union was the only external aid provider to North Korea.\footnote{Jiyoung Kim, 431.} However, in 1950, China also began to play a major role in supporting North Korea with military and financial assistance. In addition to the Korean War support with military troops, China contributed US$459.6M to North Korea’s post-Korean War rehabilitation project between 1953 and 1960; within the same period, the Soviet Union contributed US$609.0M.\footnote{The Korean War was a turning point in North Korean-Chinese relations. Over the 3 years of the War, “a total of 2.97 million Chinese soldiers,” which is reported to be more than the Soviet support, were provided to fight on North Korea’s side. Other Socialist countries, including East Germany and Czechoslovakia, also provided post-Korean War reconstruction aid, but only the Soviet Union and China remained in the support group after 1970. \textit{China Daily}, “180,000 Chinese Soldiers Killed in Korean War” (June 28, 2010); Savada ed., 39; Jiyoung Kim, 431.} With such reconstruction assistance from its two major communist allies in the first decade after 1953, North Korea’s economy grew quickly and at a more noticeable pace than South Korea’s. The output of industrial commodities reached pre-Korean War levels within five years, and the country achieved a 30 percent
economic growth rate between 1954 and 1956, and 21 percent between 1957 and 1960. Accordingly, Pyongyang was "ahead of Seoul in per capita national output" until the early 1960s.\(^{50}\) However, its economic growth slowed down afterwards, and by the early 1970s, it began to lag seriously behind its southern rival.

The Korean War brought a significant population loss to North Korea both by the military casualties and because of a large exodus to the south. This was partially recovered by assistance from the Soviet Union. A North Korean Consulate General was opened in Nakhodka, Russia in 1958, and the Korean population within the Soviet bloc was allowed, and encouraged, to acquire North Korean citizenship. With the promise of better education and living conditions, and freedom from racial discrimination, North Korean propaganda in Sakhalin had significant success in Pyongyang’s effort to address its population shortage (see chapter 3.1., pages 29 and 30). Between 1957 and 1960, 5,504 Sakhalin Koreans moved to North Korea, and by 1966, 65 percent of those who remained on Sakhalin acquired North Korean citizenship.\(^{51}\) It is worth noting in this regard that once acquired, the citizenship could not be rescinded according to the North Korean law.\(^ {52}\)

North Korea’s aggressive orientation towards the south continued throughout the Cold War era. Kim Il Sung government initiated several border skirmishes and orchestrated terrorist attacks against South Korean political leaders, media personnel and institutions. The most intense phase of such violence was in the latter half of the 1960s; while it is reported that 3,693 armed agents were infiltrated into South Korea between 1954

\(^{50}\) Savada ed., 113.  
\(^{51}\) Cho, 56 & 77.  
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 79.
and 1992, 20 percent of these happened between 1967 and 1968. In October 1969, Kim Il Sung changed tactics and announced that “the policy of peaceful unification would be renewed.” Several inter-Korea talks were subsequently coordinated by the Red Cross. However, the reconciliation efforts soon broke down and North Korea resumed its terrorist and military attacks. Assassination attempts were made against Korean President Park Chung Hee in 1968 and 1974, and President Chun Doo Hwan in 1983, and multiple border skirmishes broke out in the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and Northern Limit Line (NLL) between North and South Korea.

As explained above, North Korea’s relationship with the Soviet Union after the Korean War produced a partial solution to the Sakhalin Koreans’ predicament. Even though many of those who went to North Korea lost the opportunity to return to their own homeland in the South, it was a homecoming of sorts. For those who chose to stay, however, the Cold War standoff continued to block their desire to return home.

2.3 South Korea

As with the Soviet Union after WWII, South Korea experienced a devastated economy and decades of political persecution under successive dictatorships. In addition, South had to overcome the legacy of four decades of Japanese colonialism and adjust to a tense standoff with North Korea that drained precious resources from its treasury. In this context, Seoul’s principle objectives were to minimize contacts with ideological threats and strengthen its

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54 Savada ed., 196.
alliances with those nations that would benefit the economy. For these reasons, South Korea was not in a position to become involved in any serious or sustained way with the case of the Sakhalin Koreans. In fact, the problem of those victims of colonialism and the Cold War could become a further source of instability in its socio-political and economic terms.

In 1948, after the USSR-U.S. trusteeship ended, the southern part of the Korean peninsula came under the control of Rhee Syngman’s authoritarian regime. As a country newly liberated from Japanese colonialism, South Korea’s government system could be described as being at an infancy stage with minimal planning mechanisms. This was a huge liability given that the economy was in ruins, the population was experiencing extreme poverty, and the government lacked the basic infrastructure and resources needed to foster recovery. The situation worsened when the Korean War broke out in June 1950. These extreme and desperate circumstances reinforced both Rhee’s authoritarian orientation and anti-communist fervor. He portrayed himself as a “transcendent leader who stood out above the partisan and factional struggles of daily politics,” meaning in practice that he did not accept any forms of political opposition or engagement with the ‘Reds.’

Even after the trusteeship ended, South Korea remained one of the largest recipients of U.S. aid during the Cold War. With U.S. support, South Korea’s basic infrastructure was largely restored by the late 1950s, and its education system was reformed based on the U.S. model. Former Japanese properties including farmland and businesses were

55 Jinwung Kim, 422.
redistributed with the help of U.S. advisors, and for the most part, the process benefited existing elites and former Japanese collaborators. Tenant farmers, small vendors, shareholders and family business owners arose as the new ruling class, and this lead to the foundation of the Korean conglomerate chaebol (재벌, large family-owned business conglomerates) system, which forged a strong relationship with the government.

Rhee’s hard line government was unwaveringly backed by Washington, a commitment reinforced by the Korean War. Under Rhee’s political repression, democracy was lacking and no political dissent was tolerated. All those suspected of pro-communist activities and association with North Korea were detained and tortured: the Jeju Massacre (April 1948 – May 1949) and the crushing of the Yeosu-Sunchon Rebellion (October to November 1948) demonstrate Rhee’s zero tolerance approach to all forms of opposition. His brutal reign ended with his resignation following the April 19 Movement of 1960. However, his fiercely repressive and anti-communist approach continued under his successor, Park Chung Hee.

Park led a military coup in 1960 and thereby acceded to the presidency in a long reign that ended with his assassination in 1979. Under Park, South Korea’s political surveillance and persecution were strengthened with the establishment of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency in June 1961, and 11 years later by the declaration of a state of martial law, in which the National Assembly was dismissed and strict media censorship was implemented. Subsequently, an anti-government cultural movement and demonstrations began among university students. At first, however, this was but a small distraction in South Korean public life, as the nation’s biggest concern was to improve the
living conditions of ordinary citizens. An economic slump brought on by the Korean War continued throughout the 1960s. During the so-called ‘spring suffering’ period of the late 1960s, about 2.4 million workers were unemployed and some 80 percent of factories in the Seoul-Incheon area stopped operating. As Korean historian Kim Jinwung describes this punishing era, people cared less about democracy and “the finer points of civil rights; they wanted jobs, price controls, and affordable loans.”

Park’s top priority was ‘economic self-sufficiency and prosperity.’ In contrast to Rhee, he gradually moved away from depending on U.S. support to export-oriented industrialization, which raised the status of domestic private businesses and the chaebol as state partners. The government’s relations with the hand-picked new elite groups became closer, and more direct support in the form of inexpensive bank loans, access to foreign aid and technology, and tax benefits were provided to export-industries. In this era of state-guided industrialization and infrastructure development, dramatic improvements were also seen in countryside. The 1970 Saemaul Undong (새마을운동, ‘New Community Movement’) was introduced with several economic support programs to relieve debts and extreme poverty in rural areas. Under the initiative, chemical fertilizers and mechanized equipment were provided to boost farm industries and rice production. Important steps to end rural isolation were also taken via road construction, electrification, and the introduction of telephones and televisions. Accordingly, people in small villages began to enjoy the benefits of paved roads, bridges and irrigation systems. Such support of the rural

57 Jinwung Kim, 430.
58 Ibid.
poor, a demographic that was less of a concern under Rhee, became a major legacy of Park Chung Hee that is remembered by beneficiaries even five decades later today.

Under Park’s rule, South Korean foreign policy was geared towards reconciliation with Japan. Park, a graduate of the Imperial Japanese Army Academy who often expressed his admiration for Japan, signed a normalization treaty with Tokyo in 1965. The treaty provided a substantial contribution to the South Korean economy, with compensation payout totaling approximately $800M, as well as sources of investment, technology, trade and entrepreneurial skills. The agreement increased anti-Japanese and anti-government sentiment among those who considered it a betrayal to the nation because there were still several unresolved disputes relating to Japan’s post-colonial responsibilities, such as the ‘comfort women,’ forced labours, and Kanto earthquake. However, as the government was bringing such tremendous economic benefits to the majority of citizens in South Korea, Park’s directives and policies, including anti-communism and a capitalist alliance, were widely trusted and supported.

Although South Korea’s economic reliance on the U.S. decreased under Park, the political and military alliance between the two continued. Between 1965 and 1973, a total of 325,000 South Korean soldiers were dispatched to support the U.S. campaign in Vietnam. This contribution to the Cold War brought tremendous economic benefits in return. Revenues derived from the war made up 40 and 45 percent respectively of the South Korean foreign exchange reserves in 1967 and 1968. In the Vietnam War era,

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60 Ibid., 107-108.
Seoul’s anti-Communism was further strengthened as a result of Pyongyang’s intensified terrorist and military attacks on the South (for more on this, see page 20).

During the détente era in the early 1970s, the first bilateral humanitarian and political dialogues since the partition took place through a series of Red Cross talks. Consequently, an open-door policy to all socialist countries was declared by Seoul on June 23, 1973. South Korean scholar Young-shik Bae interprets this opening not as an olive branch to Pyongyang but a diplomatic strategy to achieve “supremacy over North Korea, based not on the prevailing international mood of reconciliation but on the Cold War mood.”61 The reason for this is complicated. The U.S. military support of South Korea was diminishing. After the Nixon Doctrine of July 1969, 20,000 out of the 61,000 U.S. troops in South Korea were withdrawn, and the Carter administration proposed withdrawing the rest of ground troops in 1975.62 South Korea, still at war with and experiencing several military threats from North Korea, needed to strengthen its own defense capability. Bae further interprets the 1973 opening as a strategy of developing closer relationships with the socialist countries that were “influential with North Korea.”63 Further Red Cross-sponsored talks were conducted in 1980, but “no further significant negotiations took place until 1984.”64

As already mentioned, Park was assassinated in 1979, yet South Korea remained under military autocracy until 1987 as a former chief of the Defense Security Command,

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63 Bae, 21.
Chun Doo Hwan, immediately seized power in a military coup. However, South Korea’s political landscape was changing with the beginning of Minjung (민중, “the general public”) movement, led by university student groups as well as other pro-democracy and leftist entities. As Chun’s tyranny continued and the authorities constantly clashed with protestors, the wider public became more sensitized to human rights and socio-political issues. Various rallies were organized by the so-called ‘democracy generation’ - mostly student activists, dissident intellectuals, and the urban proletariat who felt exploited or unfairly treated by the ruling elites. The Gwangju Uprising in May 1980 and the nationwide 1987 June Struggle are the high points of the nation-wide democracy campaigns of the 1980s.

Anti-Americanism was also promoted during the early 1980s in South Korea. The demonstrators, mostly young Koreans in universities and of university age, claimed that U.S. imperialism bred South Korea’s economic and military dependence, and considered the U.S. military presence as occupation rather than a source of protection. U.S. ties and support of the South Korean government were also considered an encouragement of dictatorship. Accordingly, the U.S. was viewed as “a selfish bully” rather than a savior. The anti-Americanism spread to the Korean military, businesses, and the government bureaucracy, which criticized various aspects of South Korean-U.S. relations. Hence, the South Korean social movement of the 1980s did not only affect internal politics but also foreign relations.

\[65\] Jinwung Kim, 500.
For most of South Korea’s post-war history, economic recovery and the conflict with North Korea overshadowed all other national concerns. It was an era of intense anxiety, suffering, and authoritarian ruthlessness. In this context, the predicament of the Sakhalin Koreans was a minor issue to feature on the political agenda. Also, the fact that Japan and the Soviet Union were tied up with the problem risked making Seoul’s position worse, as Tokyo became an important Cold War ally, and Moscow remained a dangerous enemy. With more than enough to worry about in South Korea, the concerns of the Sakhalin Koreans inevitably came second.

2.4. Summary: Post WWII Politics and Economy

The Soviet Union, North Korea and South Korea were going through similar paths in the post-WWII and post-Korean War eras. They were all under the control of authoritarian dictatorships, which did not tolerate liberalism and had little concern about human rights. Consequently, virtually no discussions on individual and minority issues were allowed. In the process of post-war rehabilitation, economic recovery and development of military strength were prioritized, and humanitarian concerns and dialogues, especially beyond the ideological borders, were placed at the bottom of their priority list. With a strong sense of ideological rivalry and separation, the population under the communist regime was kept within the socialist bloc and away from the capitalist bloc, and hence it would seem that the Sakhalin Koreans were frozen in place by the political and economic forces of the Cold War in the Far East.

As indicated earlier, while 95% of the Sakhalin Koreans were assumed to be from south of 38th parallel, their hopes of returning to the birth place were neglected throughout
the Cold War period due to broader political and economic factors that affected the outlooks and priorities of the Soviet Union, North Korea, and South Korea in similar ways. The case for the Sakhalin Koreans in relations to such circumstances will be discussed further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: Issues around the Sakhalin Koreans

As explored in the previous chapter, a myriad of geo-political and economic preoccupations and constraints in the Soviet Union, North Korea, and South Korea combined to divert attention away from the case of the Sakhalin Koreans. While questions about and demands for their repatriation continued to arise, both within and outside the largely isolated community, their call for justice was sacrificed to the broader national interests of the above countries and the dynamics of the Cold War. This chapter provides a chronological investigation – including several testimonials – of how shifting Cold War politics in the Far East directly affected discussions and negotiations around the Sakhalin Koreans’ repatriation.

3.1: End of WWII to Early 1970s: Economic Challenges and Cold War Politics

My father didn’t let my mother get new furniture because they thought they were going to leave [Sakhalin] soon . . . We had things packed in the house . . . [and my parents], like many other Koreans who had lived in different regions of Karafuto did in 1945, came down to the southern port city Korsakov to get on a ship to go back to Korea. At the port they had long waited for a boat that was supposedly going to take them home to Korea.

66 Din. 179.
67 Cho, 110.
The end of WWII meant that Koreans across the Japanese empire were liberated from Japanese colonization. However, those who resided in Sakhalin were still stranded on the island, which now fell under the Soviet communist jurisdiction. The establishment of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) in 1948 effectively added a new client state to the Soviet bloc, and Moscow’s proclamation that it recognized North Korea as “the sole legitimate government on the Korean peninsula” set the stage for a Cold War showdown on the peninsula.68 The Kremlin extended this aggressive stance to the Sakhalin Korean community by establishing pro-North Korean schools and media as part of a broader propaganda program. Woo Jeong Cho’s PhD dissertation on the Sakhalin Korean diaspora includes several interviews conducted between 2008 and 2009 in Sakhalin. One of the interviewees born in 1947 describes how North Korean propaganda in his community worked to denigrate the South:

We had this newspaper from North Korea named Pioner [R.pioneer], . . . showing South Korea with beggars digging up garbage cans . . . [The Koreans] who had finished ten years of Korean schools, they wanted to study further [at college] but did not know the [Russian] language, and North Korea told [them] they would be able to study at Kim Il-Sung University for free.69

Such ideological initiatives were quite effective against a minority community that suffered discrimination, economic hardship, and a lack of opportunities for advancement--including “limited chances of college entrance and employment.”70 A Sakhalin informant in his 70s testified that many of Sakhalin Koreans “did not even try to learn the Russian language

69 Cho, 74-75.
70 Ibid., 76.
because they thought they would leave [Sakhalin] soon,” and Andre Lankov explains that “no managerial job could be taken” by the Koreans in Sakhalin. 71 The social discrimination was “hard to endure” even for those of Korean parentage born and raised in Sakhalin. A young Sakhalin Korean describes the following memory from her 16th: which helped shape her perception of North Korea as a “homeland.”

“I was young, and I was angry about the things people would say, like “You Koreans, get out of here and go back to Korea,” which was an impossible thing for us. … I was so excited see the opportunity [North Korea was offering]. … The fatherland was going to take good care of me, and I would be able to do something for the fatherland.” 72

As mentioned in chapter 2.2. (page 19), from the time its consulate opened in Nakhodka, Russia in 1958, North Korea actively campaigned to attract Sakhalin Koreans by offering them “opportunities of college education and promising jobs.”73 Such efforts met with considerable success: between the late 1950s and 1962, some four thousand Sakhalin Koreans moved to North Korea, which was depicted as ‘a paradise on earth.’ 74

For those who were yearning to return to what became South Korea, emigration was discouraged for political and economic reasons. As mentioned in the introduction, Sakhalin possessed abundant natural resources but not labourers. The labour shortage became more severe after 1945 when over 300,000 Japanese returned to their homeland, and only a few Russians were willing to move to the island “in spite of government propaganda and rather generous incentives.” 75 In January 1948, Yakov Malik (Soviet Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs) advised Yakov Chadaev (Council of Ministers

71 Cho, 56 & Lankov, “Forgotten People.”
72 Cho, 77.
73 Ibid.
74 Lankov, “Forgotten People.”
75 Ibid.
Executive Officer) in Moscow that “due to the repatriation of the Japanese from South Sakhalin, there is a labour shortage in the industry and fisheries of South Sakhalin. [Therefore] repatriation of Koreans will aggravate the shortage.”

Also, as Andrei Lankov suggests in his article “Forgotten People: the Koreans of the Sakhalin Island in 1945-1991,” the Koreans in Sakhalin were perhaps the ideal source of labour as they were “already familiar with the local climate and conditions,” and possessed the skills needed for work in the coalmines, fisheries and timber yards. With the national agenda to strengthen its postwar economy, it was an inevitable decision to keep the Korean labourers in Sakhalin, also referred as a ‘treasure island,’ for its resource development.

Meanwhile, South Korea had a serious labour surplus. While the end of colonial rule resulted in the return of millions of Koreans to the southern part of peninsula, only about half of the South Korean labour force was gainfully employed by the end of 1947, and many of the rest, especially refugees and repatriates, became involved in black-market and other criminal operations. Mines and industries were left with no Japanese owners and managers, who had developed the majority of the businesses in South Korea to 1945, and the partition of Korea made the recovery more challenging as “approximately 92

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76 Din, 179.
77 Lankov, “Forgotten People.”
78 As noted earlier, the Sakhalin Koreans who were married to Japanese were permitted to leave the island for Japan in 1958, and other Sakhalin Koreans were allowed to acquire North Korean citizenship from 1957. This suggests that Sakhalin’s labour shortage was alleviated to some extent by the mid-1950s; that the Soviet Union could afford to let people go. It is reported that “Sakhalin salaries were generally 1.5-2 times higher than salaries paid for similar work in central Russia,” and as a result, the “population increased quickly” throughout the Soviet period. In the 1966 census, 78% of Sakhalin population (640,000) was made up of Russians, and only 6.5% was Korean. Cho, 102; John J. Stephan, “Sakhalin Island: Soviet Outpost in Northeast Asia,” Asian Survey 10, no. 12 (December 1970), 1093; Sakhalin Energy Investment Company, “Sakhalin Region and Potentially Affected Districts,” retrieved on June 02, 2019, http://www.sakhalinenergy.ru/media/user/libraryeng/socialstake/socialimpact/doc_38_sia_chp4.pdf
percent of average annual power generation” had come from plants in the north. Most of the peninsula’s mineral resources were also located there.\textsuperscript{80} Moreover, as South Korea’s grain output was not enough to feed the swollen population, the U.S. government had to supply about 670 thousand metric tons of food between May 1946 and January 1948.\textsuperscript{81} While Seoul was already struggling to accommodate “more than 1 million workers [that] had returned from Japan, 120,000 from China and Manchuria, and 1.8 million from the north,” resettling additional returnees from Sakhalin in South Korea was, for obvious reasons, not desired.\textsuperscript{82} The situation only worsened with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, which over the three years of the conflict destroyed “some three-fourths of the South Korean industrial plants.”\textsuperscript{83}

The Cold War conflict was another barrier to the Sakhalin Koreans’ repatriation to South Korea. Under the fierce anti-communist leadership of Syngman Rhee, who described communism as akin to “cholera,” South Korea’s anti-communist orientation evolved rapidly and increased rigidly after 1948. The National Security Law (NSL), introduced that year, outlawed “any activities that might be beneficial to communist activities,” such as the dissemination of communist ideas and organization of communist groups.\textsuperscript{84} After the Korean War, anti-communism became “the core of dominant political ideologies [in South Korea], overriding all other political ideologies.”\textsuperscript{85} Annual anti-

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 6-7.
\textsuperscript{81} Charles R. Frank Jr., Kwang Suk Kim and Larry E. Westphal, \textit{Foreign Trade Regimes and Economic Development: South Korea} (The National Bureau of Economic Research, 1975), 8.
\textsuperscript{82} Savada and Shaw, 49.
\textsuperscript{83} Jinwung Kim, 439.
\textsuperscript{84} Kwang-Yeong Shin, “The Trajectory of Anti-Communism in South Korea,” \textit{Asian Journal of German and European Studies} 2, no. 3 (December 2017), 4.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 2.
communist campaigns were institutionalized nation-wide, and any anti-government activities were accused of violating the NSL. For example, Bong Am Cho, Syngman Rhee’s political rival, was executed in 1959 for proposing a peaceful unification with North Korea. The NSL was abolished when Syngman Rhee’s presidency ended in 1960. But anti-communism was reinforced with the emergence of the aforementioned anti-communist military coup d'état (May 16 coup) led by Park Chung Hee, resulting in the enactment of the hard-line Anti-communist Law in 1961.

In this anxiety-ridden environment, all Sakhalin Koreans were considered dangerous and hence undesirable, regardless of their place of origin on the Korean peninsula, because of their extended contact with the Soviet Union. In 1967, a South Korean news article pointed out accordingly that the main problem with helping Sakhalin Koreans’ repatriation is that “they lived under Communism for an extended period.” In other words, the Sakhalin Koreans, who were influenced by the Soviet and North Korean ideologies, were feared as ‘Reds’ and thereby considered threats to South Korean security.

3.2: Early 1970s to mid-1980s: Détente and Potential Openings

...And in the 1970s (I do not remember the exact date), rumors were circulating that Leonov [General Secretary of the Sakhalin Regional Communist Party, 1960-1978] was in Moscow, and he was asked how many Koreans would go if Soviet authorities would let them. And he replied not many, just the elderly and those who were single. Then he got permission to take applications for departures. But suddenly large numbers of people began to come and to write applications...so many of them, almost all Koreans...and that was it! The end! They said nobody could go.

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86 Ibid. 4.
88 Din, 184.
The 1970s was a period of U.S.-USSR détente, and the eased tensions between the two superpowers gave hope to the Sakhalin Koreans. After the Nixon administration began promoting increased dialogue with the Eastern bloc after his first Moscow visit as the U.S. president in 1972, South Korea also announced that “it had moderated its policy to improve relations with communist countries.” South Korea’s nordpolitik was accordingly launched with a directive from president Park Chung Hee, while he still considered North Korea a military threat.

At the height of the détente era, in the midst of the Helsinki consultations and negotiations, began in 1972 with intention to promote East and West geo-political and economic cooperation, the U.S. Congress urged the Soviet Union to liberalize its emigration policy, which had been tightly controlled for most of the postwar period. After the U.S. identified this as “a prerequisite for lifting trade barriers,” the Soviet Union permitted the emigration of 370,000 citizens, mostly ethnic Jews. In 1974, Japan, which signed a peace treaty with the Soviet Union in 1956, stated it would accept the Sakhalin Koreans if they were allowed to leave, and Moscow responded by developing policies and procedures to allow the diaspora to leave the island. In 1976, the Soviet government introduced a new emigration policy for the Sakhalin Koreans, and invited those seeking to return to South Korea to file an application at the Immigration Office. The authorities

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90 On June 23, 1973 Park’s “Special Foreign Policy Statement Regarding Peace and Unification” (6.23 평화통일외교정책 선언) declared that the “Republic of Korea will open its door to all nations under the principles of reciprocity and equality, and urge other countries with different ideologies and political systems to do the same.” Park Chung Hee, “The Special Declaration for Peaceful Unification” (Jun. 23, 1973).
92 Lankov, “Forgotten People.”
expected that only a few elderly and single people would respond to the opportunity. According to Cho, this was because the Koreans’ longing to return home - whether to North or South Korea - was believed to have diminished over time, and in the 1970s, they increasingly “turned to the Soviet Union for legal and social belonging for the sake of the children”.93 Nevertheless, more than 800 applications were filed within a week.94

In reaction to the prospect of a mass exodus of Sakhalin Koreans from the Communist bloc, Pyongyang expressed strong opposition to the Soviet change of policy, which would allow further population loss to its econo-political rival in the south of the border.95 South Korea, also, did not support the Soviet decision. In the weeks that followed, four elderly Koreans were granted permission to exit the USSR and traveled to Japan, but their entry permits to South Korea were denied, and they had to return to Sakhalin.96 Then in September 1976, a Soviet fighter jet defected to Japan, causing a deterioration of Soviet-Japanese relations, and the process of releasing the remaining Sakhalin Koreans stalled. In the end, the Soviet decision on the matter was reversed, and the exit visas were all annulled.

This lead to the case of To (or Do) Man-Sang, which became a significant turning point of the repatriation movement. Frustrated about the collapse of the initiative, from the late 1976 and throughout 1977, forty Sakhalin Koreans including To Man-Sang’s family led a series of public protests and petitions against the Soviet authorities. The activists and their families were arrested and expelled to North Korea, “essentially as prisoners, under

93 Cho, 116.
96 Din, 185.
armed guard.” An eyewitness says that “the police came and ordered the activists to pack their things. The husband, his wife, and their daughter [who was] (only 100 days old) were rounded up,” and were never seen again.

Around this time, contrary to the positive expectations that arose in the late 1950s and 1960s, deportation to North Korea was possibly the most frightening punishment for the Sakhalin Koreans. This is evident in the reported words of a Sakhalin Korean activist, as remembered by his son: “My father once told me: ‘Perhaps, I would not be that afraid of a prison. But they could send me to North Korea, together with all of you. And this is much, much worse than going to prison. North Korea is a hell.’”

Since the 1970s, the Sakhalin Koreans began to realize that North Korea was a far cry from a ‘paradise on earth’ as its socio-political conditions had deteriorated severely under Kim Il Sung’s dictatorship. Many young Koreans “who had left Sakhalin for college education in the fatherland went missing,” and those who tried to escape North Korea “had been shot to death at the border or executed if caught in escape.”

This situation was no secret in Sakhalin, and hence the threat of extradition to North Korea was intimidating enough to snuff out remaining civilian repatriation activism. Furthermore, the Cold War conflict between the West and East resumed as the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, and South Korea’s anti-communist orientation further strengthened after the Soviets shot down Korean Airlines Flight 007 in September, 1983, killing all 269 passengers and crew. In these circumstances,

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97 Lankov, “Forgotten People.”
98 Din, 183-184.
99 Lankov, “Sakhalin Koreans Foiled in Campaign to Come Home.”
100 Cho, 78-79.
productive diplomatic conversations between the Soviet Union and South Korea became virtually impossible, and the project to repatriate the remaining Sakhalin Koreans died.

CHAPTER 4. New Leaders, Socio-Economic Reforms and the Breakthrough

In the mid-1980s new presidents were elected in the Soviet Union and South Korea, initiating radical changes to Soviet-South Korean relations and the situation of Sakhalin Koreans repatriation. Specifically the respective Soviet and South Korean programs perestroika and nordpolitik, which prioritized multinational cooperation beyond ideological differences, significantly eased the long-lasting Cold War tensions and antagonism between the two countries.

In the Soviet Union, the 1980s was a time of political liberation and economic reform. Political criticism through public voices and media outlets came to be tolerated, and ideological propaganda slogans were removed from Moscow and other Soviet cities. Mikhail Gorbachev, elected as the Soviet president in 1985, introduced perestroika and Glasnost with the objective of accelerating socio-economic and cultural development through internal and external “openness” and multinational cooperation. Unlike the détente in the 1970s, the new policy was not only geared towards reaching out to the Western powers, but also toward establishing diplomatic ties with non-communist Asia-Pacific nations. At the Vladivostok speech of July 1986, he stated that the Soviet Union

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was ready to establish new, constructive relationships with non-communist countries in Asia and the Pacific.  

As it happened, Eduard A. Shevardnadze’s 1986 visit to Tokyo coincided with an important development in Park No-Hak’s campaign started in 1958 to secure the repatriation of the Sakhalin Koreans (see page 7). That year, a group of 21 Japanese lawyers working with Park and fellow repatriation activists filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government asserting that the repatriation of the Sakhalin Koreans was a post-colonial responsibility. Being aware of the repatriation efforts that had lasted nearly three decades, a Japanese official asked Shevardnadze about the Soviet plans on the issue. Shevardnadze answered that it was a complicated matter involving North Korea’s strong opposition, but that “there may be room for exceptions.” One of the Japanese lawyers who sued the Japanese government on behalf of the Sakhalin Koreans, Kenichi Takago, was thrilled about this response, describing it as “the best news in years.” He explained that this statement “could be the first step in reaching an understanding by the Japanese, Soviets and South Koreans to allow relatives in South Korea to travel to Sakhalin via Japan.” The following year, when perestroika and glasnost turned into “a full-scale campaign” with measurable new economic and political freedoms for Soviet citizens, a substantial wave of emigration took place from the Soviet Union. While only 2,943 permissions were issued in 1985, some 140,000 Soviets in total were allowed to leave the

102 Mikhail Gorbachev, “Vladivostok Speech” (Jul. 28, 1986).
103 Horvat.
105 Horvat.
106 Ibid.
country in 1987 and 1988. Yet, the Sakhalin Koreans did not benefit from this change of policy, because there were no formal diplomatic relations between Moscow and Seoul.

This obstacle was overcome with the 1988 election of South Korea’s first democratic president, Roh Tae Woo, ending the long reign of authoritarian, vehemently anti-communist military regimes. Roh pledged to revive South Korea’s stalled nordpolitik, by improving relations with the Soviet Union and China toward the eventual peaceful unification of the two Koreas:

_We will positively pursue the Northern Policy, improving relations with the Northern countries with which [South] Korea maintains no diplomatic relations. Improved relations with these countries will contribute to the stability, peace and common prosperity in Northeast Asia... This diplomatic route will also pave the way to reunification of our divided fatherland._

In January 1988, North Korea boycotted the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics, but the Soviet Union announced it would participate in the Games. On 16 September 1988 - one day before the opening of the Olympics - Gorbachev’s Krasnoyarsk speech indicated that he was ready to develop economic ties with South Korea: “I think that, in the context of the general improvement of the situation on the Korean peninsula, possibilities may open up for establishing economic ties with South Korea.”

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109 A Korean scholar, Tae Dong Chung, interprets that the decision on Nordpolitik has been influenced by the unification of Germany, which “heartened” many Koreans to “believe and expect that the day will soon come when the old order of division and confrontation in Northeast Asia is replaced by the new order of unification and reconciliation.” Tae Dong Chung, “Korea’s Nordpolitik: Achievements & Prospects,” _Asian Perspective 15_, no.2 (Fall-Winter 1991), 150.  
The Soviet-North Korean relationship remained a stumbling block for decades as the latter consistently opposed the Sakhalin Koreans’ repatriation to South Korea. Understanding the Soviet dilemma, Roh made it clear that South Korea was not against the Soviet alliance with North Korea, and repeatedly assured Moscow that one of the main objectives of the *nordpolitik* policy was to improve relations on the Korean peninsula toward eventual unification. In the UN General Assembly in October 1988, Roh framed his policy of openness and dialogue as a process towards international peace and prosperity:

> It is also our belief that those socialist countries with close ties to North Korea should continue to maintain positive relations and cooperate with North Korea even as they improve their relations with us. The pursuit of mutual respect and prosperity through increasing cooperation . . . is a necessary process which we must go through in order to build the relationship of trust essential for the nation’s reunification. When such a relationship is firmly established, we can look forward to realizing peaceful unification.\(^{112}\)

These tactfully delivered speeches provided the basis for the Soviet Union to move forward in forging closer ties with South Korea without straining its alliance relationship with North Korea to breaking point. In April 1989, Moscow and Seoul exchanged trade offices, and in June of that year South Korea’s opposition leader Kim Young Sam was invited to visit Moscow for a foreign policy discussion.\(^{113}\) During the visit, the Kremlin announced that it would allow 36,000 Sakhalin Koreans to permanently leave the Soviet Union.\(^{114}\) In the same year, the first draft of a bill to restore the Soviet citizens’ freedom of movement was approved by the Supreme Soviet, based on the assertion that every “individual should be

\(^{112}\) Roh Tae Woo, “Dialogue for Peace,” Address at the 43rd session of the general assembly (Oct. 18, 1988).


free to choose the country in which he lives.”115 Thereafter, 450 Sakhalin Koreans gained approval to visit South Korea for a family reunion, and 9 individuals who obtained a family invitation from South Korea were approved to return permanently to their homeland.

At the first Soviet-South Korean summit meeting in June 1990, Roh reiterated his determination to reboot Seoul’s relationship with Moscow towards eventual resolution of the Korean divide. He stated at the outset:

*I am confident that our talks will prove to be a major impetus for promoting not only Republic of Korea-Soviet Union relations and tension reduction in Korea, but also peace and security throughout North-East Asia. . . North Korea is no longer our rival or adversary. It should be our partner in the quest for common prosperity.*116

The full Soviet-South Korean diplomatic relations were established in September 1990, and subsequently another 120 Sakhalin Koreans flew to meet their families in South Korea. In January 1991, South Korea agreed to provide $3 billion in economic aid to the USSR in exchange for diplomatic recognition.

The main motivation behind the mid-1980s Soviet reform policy was economic. In his essay, Gorbachev explains that Soviet economic growth had been slowing since the mid-1970s, and by the early-1980s it had fallen “to a level close to economic stagnation.”117 He realized that the old-fashioned socialist policies were not working, and that multilateral cooperation was urgently needed. With this in mind, South Korea was one of the most attractive and ideal prospects for economic partnership. With the ‘Miracle on the Han

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River’ between 1945 and the mid-1980s, it transformed itself from an agricultural developing country into an advanced manufacturing giant that was one of the largest contributors to the global economy. As Michael J. Seth indicates, during this period South Korea’s exports “diversified and shifted to medium and high tech goods,” and labour intensive products were replaced by “electronics, computers, and semi-conductors as lead exports.”

In his memoirs, Gorbachev repeatedly stresses the Soviet need for scientific and technological development and defined the gross output in heavy industry as a “top-priority.” In this regard, Seth indicates that it was natural for Gorbachev to look to South Korea, which became an emerging powerhouse in modern industry and technology, and “had become one of the largest shipbuilders and steel exporters in the world.” Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was one the world’s biggest producers of raw materials such as oil and natural gas, which were lacking in South Korea, and also the centre of communist world that provided access to Eastern Europe markets. As Byung-joon Ahn explains, the bilateral trade between “the resource-rich USSR and manufacturing South Korea” was economically complementary.

As touched upon above, the democratization of human rights, including freedom of emigration was another main feature of perestroika. Further to the two afore-mentioned changes to the Soviet emigration policy in the early 1970s and 1987 (see Chapter 3.2 and 4; pages 34 and 38), Gorbachev acknowledged the importance of democratic human rights

119 Gorbachev, Perestroika, 5.
121 Gorbachev, Perestroika, 7.
122 Ahn, 820.
and international humanitarian exchanges. However, the history of the Soviet emigration policy shows that such discussions were linked to economic negotiations – with the U.S. in 1976 and South Korea in 1989. This is an indication that Moscow’s willingness to relax its strict policies on humanitarian issues was a card it was willing to play in the pursuit of economic gains. When the first direct conversation on the Sakhalin Koreans’ repatriation issue occurred between the USSR and South Korea, the warming of relations between the two countries had already led to trade offices being exchanged. As well, since political freedom and the second largest emigration wave already hit the Soviet Union in 1987, after the introduction of perestroika and glasnost, the repatriation discussion was made possible without much hesitation.

**CHAPTER 5. Conclusion**

The preceding analysis has argued that the Sakhalin Koreans’ repatriation problem largely rested in the hands of the Soviet Union, South Korea, and North Korea, and that post-WWII and Cold War-related geopolitical considerations consistently capped humanitarian concerns of the case for the repatriation. When in 1945–47 the Sakhalin Koreans expected to return to their homeland after being liberated from Japan, the division of Korea outbreak of the Cold War, and subsequent Korea War, created a political climate of hostility and competition that stymied their hopes. Additionally, having economic and political recovery and reconstruction as the most pressing goals, Moscow, Seoul, or Pyongyang was not willing to give serious attention to the problem of the Sakhalin Koreans, a relatively small-numbered minority group. In other words, their economic and military restoration
was prioritized over humanitarian concerns, and the geo-political and economic conflicts between the West and communist-bloc blocked all possibilities of constructive negotiation.

Thirty years later, the West-East tensions eased in a new climate of détente. Yet, South and North Korea were still not ready to underwrite the repatriation efforts to South Korea as they maintained hostile rivalry towards each other, and the Cold War antagonism revived before the repatriation initiative gained momentum. It was only in the mid-1980s that the Soviet Union and South Korea put the Cold-War conflict aside and joined a growing international mood of reconciliation. As the importance of Soviet-North Korean economic and political relations diminished, and the Soviet Union and South Korea saw more values in moving forward to each other for co-beneficial economic partnership, a direct socio-political dialogue was initiated beyond their ideological boundaries. Along the way, the discussions on Sakhalin Koreans’ homecoming project also progressed rapidly.

As demonstrated throughout the thesis, the Sakhalin Koreans were essentially hostages of the Cold War and the division of Korea into North and South. The Soviet desire for communist expansionism lead to the need to secure as many people as possible on Sakhalin for economic and political reasons. For its part, South Korea feared that accepting Koreans from Sakhalin, who they believed had become inculcated with communist ways of seeing the world, would further intensify the socio-economic unrest that had broken out since the division of Korea. There were possibilities of resolution in the 1970s, but the geo-political tensions between countries of different ideologies were not fully resolvable until the 1980s when important political and economic changes in both countries occasioned a substantial warming of the relationship. Because it was never considered a diplomatic priority in either country, the Sakhalin Koreans’ repatriation was
heavily dependent on the broader Cold War climate. In such a sense, the Sakhalin Koreans were both forgotten victims of Japanese colonialism and pawns in the bipolar world that followed World War II.
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