

# The Early Soviet Public Diplomacy Activities in the Colonial Korea

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## 1. Introduction

Public diplomacy which was first introduced as a term in relation to foreign policy conduct by Edmund Gullion in 1965, has asserted an increasingly important role in foreign policy making. The countries have employed public diplomacy for various purposes such as nation branding, improving image for economic or political gains, and political reconciliation. Implementation of public diplomacy and the choice of its tools and methods, vary depending on the domestic conditions and political situation in a particular country, as well as on international developments.

Public diplomacy has been effectively applied as a foreign policy since the very birth of the Soviet state in 1922. After 1917 October revolution and following bloody Civil war the first socialist state was denied diplomatic recognition by most of the countries and found itself in diplomatic blockade. Under these circumstances the USSR turned to public diplomacy to solve its imminent foreign policy tasks: pursuit of diplomatic recognition, development of economic and cultural ties with foreign capitalist countries under Lenin's concept of "peaceful coexistence towards countries with different social systems" and, simultaneously, spread of Communist Revolution through the Communist International (Lenin 1971).

The given research attempts at "mapping" Soviet public diplomacy in the colonial Korea by looking at what extend the public diplomacy activities of the first socialist state were defined by the international context and also by the specific conditions of the targeted country – colonial Korea. To answer this question first I will analyze Soviet public diplomacy in the 1920s-1930s in Korea through the key elements - goals, actors and soft power assets and next compare the obtained data with general trajectory of public diplomacy policy of the Soviet state.

From 1905 to 1945 Korean foreign affairs had been administrated by Japan and direct evidences of both official and unofficial contacts between Koreans and foreigners during that period are not easy to be obtained. The present research fills the void by introducing previously unknown documents retained in the State Archive of Russian Federation (GARF).<sup>1</sup> They provide a new evidence of direct contacts between the first socialist state and Korean people,

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<sup>1</sup> Государственный Архив Российской Федерации (GARF), Электронные описи, <http://www.statearchive.ru/383> (accessed April 30, 2013)

entrepreneurs and organizations in the 1920s - 1930s. Particularly in the study I refer to the reports of the Eastern department of All Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) and its branches in Tokyo and Shanghai.

The All Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) was established in 1925 for the purpose of developing contacts in the fields of science and culture between Soviet and foreign institutes, public organizations and civilians. The primary goal of VOKS was to assist in the development of scientific and cultural ties between establishments and public organizations in the USSR and foreign countries as well as to promote connections between particular people in science and culture. At the same time VOKS openly declared its ultimate goal as switching public opinion in favor of the Soviet Union and distributing information on the USSR for the purpose of creating a positive image of the country.

Structurally VOKS consisted of several territorial divisions and maintained a network of representative offices in a number of countries including Japan and China. The Eastern division of VOKS (Восточный отдел) was vested with a task to supervise all non-government contacts with the countries of Middle Asia and the Far East. In 1925 VOKS established its representative office in Tokyo and in 1927 a branch in Shanghai was opened. In the 1920s and 1930s VOKS maintained contacts with Korea through the Soviet Consulate and Trade Mission in Seoul and its offices in Tokyo and Shanghai.

## **2. Ideological front: support for the communist movement**

Soviet public diplomacy in the colonial Korea was implemented in the three dimensions: ideological (with the purpose of supporting and expanding the communist movement) and cultural dimensions (aimed at providing information and education on a life and culture in the Soviet State), and “relations building” (intended for rising awareness of a “good will” of the Soviet people and establishing channels for communication). However, in the early 1920s emphasizes was made on the ideological components of public diplomacy within a framework of Marxist concept which advocated “world communism” through global revolution and proletarian internationalism.

The Soviet government which took over the power after the Socialist Revolution in 1917 viewed a growth of the liberation movement in Asia in all of its various forms as a powerful resource for further spread of “world communist movement” and rented a full support (Lenin 1971). For instance, in a memorandum “Urgent Tasks for Comintern in the East Asia” (October, 17, 1922) G. Safonov, a head of Eastern Secretariat of Comintern, brought attention of Comintern to Korea where, in his opinion, prospects of the communist movement looked most

bright as follows: “In Korea revolutionary discontent which has taken a form of armed fight in northern parts of the country, promises us the most optimistic hopes” (Чумаков 1999)

Indeed the members of the Korean diaspora<sup>2</sup> of Russian Maritime Province were actively engaged in the liberation movement against Japanese occupation: “Hanminhwe” (Society of Korean people) was founded in 1905, Lee San Sol and Lee Don Hwee established the Korean Restoration Army in Vladivostok; various Korean public organizations were operating in the Russian Far East. The Koreans in the Russian Far East were also active participants of the growing communist movement; so by the end of 1920s there were 16 Korean Party organizations consisting of 2305 members (Хан Еньу 2010).

Korean diaspora of Maritime Province, including workers fleeing impoverished Korea for a short-term employment in Russia, contributed to spread of communist ideology over the Russian border into Korea. In the Russian Far East the Korean community published such leftist newspapers as “붉은 별” (Red Star), “새 세계” (New World), “붉은 기”(Red Energy) and other; distributed political leaflets. Leftist ideology, implementation of the Marxist ideas in the Soviet Republic and specially a figure of the Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin arouse interest among Koreans. So between 1921-1932 the leading newspapers “TongA Ilbo” and “Choson Ilbo” featured 450 articles related to communism starting with “Who is Nickolai Lenin?” which appeared in the 62 issues of the periodical in July-August, 1921 (Персиц 1969). Further in 1924-1925 Choson Ilbo published a number of articles by pro-communist journalists such as “Lenin Hwekyung Insangi” (Impressions after Interview with Lenin, 1 year after his death) by Kim Dan Ya.<sup>3</sup>

Russian Communist Bolshevik Party actively supported activities of Korean communists through public diplomacy initiatives in hope to boost the liberation movement and transform it into communist uprising. Thus in 1918-1919 several Lenin’s core works - “Constitution of the Soviet Republic”, “Appeal to all Muslim Workers of Russian East”, “Program of the Communist Party” were translated into Korean language ( Kim, Schabshina 1967). At the same time the Korean communist organizations were formed in different parts of Russia; Socialist Party of Korean People (Hangook Sahwedan) was established in 1918 in Vladivostok. On May,

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<sup>2</sup> During the first decade of repressive Japanese rule (1910-1919) emigration of Korean population increased drastically including those who was fleeing to Russian Far East where number of Koreans exceeded 250 000 people. (Персиц 1969, 513)

<sup>3</sup> 이한우 Lee Han Woo. “박헌영 등 사회주의 성향 기자들 입사(入社)... 1년 만에 대부분 떠나.” *The Chosunilbo*, January 8, 2010. [http://issue.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2010/01/08/2010010800555.html](http://issue.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/01/08/2010010800555.html) (accessed December 15, 2013).

4, 1921 a Congress of Korean communist organizations of Russia took place in Irkutsk which resulted in establishment of Korean Communist Party (Koryo Konsadan).

In 1929 Several Korean activists of Communist movement including Kim Da Ya, Park Hon Yong attended the Communist International's International Lenin School (ILS) in Moscow. The ILS along with the Communist University for Proletariat of the East was another effective tool of Soviet public diplomacy aimed at education of communist party cadres.<sup>4</sup> The graduates of communist schools were drawn to work for Comintern or Soviet state organs, many of them assumed later crucial positions in leadership of their countries.

However, Soviet and public diplomacy initiatives aimed at support of communist movement through dissemination of information on communist thought, preparation of communist cadres, assistance in creation communist organizations - in the long run did not meet the desired objectives in the colonial Korea.<sup>5</sup>

### **3. Soviet public diplomacy on the cultural front**

From the mid-1920s the Soviet Republic started to pursue actively a policy of peaceful coexistence between the states with different social systems aimed at gaining diplomatic recognition by the Western countries and Japan. After several years of negotiations Japan formally recognized the Soviet Union in 1925. With establishing of diplomatic relations with Japan the Soviet government got access to official channels for implementation of its public diplomacy on the territory of Japan and Korea through the Embassy, the Consulates and Trade Missions.

Increase in cultural exchange between the Soviet Union and Japan in 1920-1930s also intensified Soviet cultural penetration into Korea which technically was a colony of Japan. The Soviet Embassy in Tokyo also served as a headquarter for Japanese department of the All Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) which worked to mend fences

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<sup>4</sup> In the 1920s, the Soviet government established several educational facilities for foreign communist activists in order to lecture them on communist thought and prepare them for “practical” communist struggle in their countries. In 1921 Communist University for Proletariat of the East after Joseph Stalin (Stalin School) opened its doors targeting students from Asia. The International Lenin School was founded in 1925, the same year Communist University of Chinese Proletariat was established to train Chinese students.

<sup>5</sup> Scholars attribute failure of communist movement in the colonial Korea to a number of factors: lack of organizational structures in the aftermath of Japanese oppression against communist organizations and activists in the 1920s-1930s, disputes among communist factions and their leaders, failure to win support for movement among workers and peasants by the Korean communist activists who were represented mostly by intellectuals, etc.

and expand Soviet cultural ties with Japan and its people through collaboration with various Russo-Japanese societies, organization of concerts, exhibitions and fairs, invitation prominent Japanese cultural figures to tour Soviet Union. Thus a representative of VOKS in Japan professor E. Spalvin in the letters dated 1927 wrote: "VOKS makes efforts to expand a circle of friends in Japan and to supply them periodically with bulletins pictures, illustrations of different aspects of life of the Soviet Union and appropriate literature".

It is indicative that activity of VOKS branch in Tokyo was not limited to the territory of Japanese islands. Thus E.Spalvin mentioned in his reports to the headquarters (Eastern department of VOKS in Moscow) professor A.Voznesenski who worked in Korea and could distribute around 5000 posters introducing VOKS and activities of this organization among population.<sup>6</sup> Soviet Consulate in Seoul which was open on September, 24, 1925 also maintained close ties with VOKS and its branch in Japan to conduct various activities aimed at raising awareness on Soviet culture among Koreans. So Consul Chichaev in a letter to VOKS representative in Japan prof. E.Spalvin, informed that Consulate in Korea continuously received inquiries from Korean journalists and editors regarding Soviet literature: "How proletariat literature has changed after evolution? Which critical writings are highlighting the recent directions in the Soviet literature? How can be explained interest to the writers of the pre-revolution period – Turgenev, Tolstoi, Dostoevski?" In the letter Consul Chichaev observed that the above mentioned questions demonstrated an interest of the Korean people to the life in the Soviet Union. VOKS responded to the letter of Consul Chichaev by sending in Korea 40 titles of Soviet literature.<sup>7</sup>

VOKS attached special importance to distribution of the Soviet literature in the East with the purpose to raise awareness on the Soviet Union. Tatiana Gabroussenko points out at strong influence of Soviet literature in colonial Korea referring to a survey undertaken by Munhag konsol magazin (Literature construction) in 1932 (Gabroussenko 2010). The survey included almost a dozen names of proletariat writers such as A. Serafimovich, M. Sholokhov, A. Fadeev, V. Mayakovskii. Further T. Gabroussenko notes that while the majority of the Soviet proletariat works were published in Japan in Japanese language, fiction of the leftist writer Maxim Gorky was translated in Korean in the 1920-1930s and "contributed to the leftward drift of the Korean intellectual world"(Gabroussenko 2010).

Despite significant difficulties VOKS continued to engage the Koreans and other peoples

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<sup>6</sup> Report "Our friends in Japan" at State Archive of Russian Federation (GARF), Fond 5283 (VOKS) on microfilm 5283-4-27 (1).

<sup>7</sup> Report "Our friends in Japan" at State Archive of Russian Federation (GARF), Fond 5283 (VOKS) on microfilm 5283-4-27 (1).

of the Far East through its representatives in Tokyo and Shanghai - until the beginning of the World War II.

#### **4. The Soviet Humanitarian Aid to the Victims of 1925 Flooding**

Another illustrative initiative of Soviet public diplomacy was the humanitarian assistance of the Soviet people provided to the victims of the Great Flooding of the Han river (을축년 대홍수) wherein torrential rains that fell between July 15 and July 18, 1925, left vast areas along the Han river submerged under water killing more than 600 hundred people. The devastating flood received coverage in the international media. On July 19, 1925, the Chicago Daily Tribune, for example, reported that hundreds of Koreans had perished and thousands more were threatened with starvation as a result of floods in Seoul (Break 1925). The Soviet newspapers wrote about disaster of an unprecedented scale when 40 000 people were left homeless (Ванин 1988).

Despite its own economic hardships in the aftermath of the Civil war, the Soviet people responded to the needs of the Korean people by collecting donations through the Russian Red Cross Society and division of Krestintern (the Peasant International). On August 7, 1925 the Deputy-Chair of the Russian Red Cross Society informed the Soviet Embassy in Japan in a telegram about the transfer of 5 000 rubles for the victims of the Korean flooding. Further, in the beginning of October of the same year, Krestintern sent 65 000 rubles from Moscow to Korea. The money collected by the Soviet people was transferred to Bugpunghwa society (북봉화), a leftist organization based in Japan, which forwarded the Soviet donations to the account of the Korean aid organization in Seoul bank (Ванин 1988). The attempts of the Japanese colonial government to obstruct the dispensing of the Soviet aid money to the victims of flooding were met with protests from the Korean public. The newspaper “Sidae Ilbo” criticized the Japanese authorities: “If the Japanese envy the Korean people they (Japanese) should prey to the God for a powerful earthquake or flooding, then Soviet Russia would help them as well” (Sidae Ilbo 01.02.1926).

In May, 1926 the Korean newspapers reported that the victims received money from the Soviet humanitarian aid (Ванин 1988). The amount of the donations was not significant but it demonstrated good-will of the Soviet people towards the Korean people. The humanitarian aid of the Soviet Union to the victims of 1925 flooding in Korea can be viewed as an early public diplomacy initiative intended to improve the country`s image among foreign audience.

## 5. The Economic Ties as Public Diplomacy Means

Revival of political and economic ties with the leading powers of the West and Japan became a high priority on the political agenda from the beginning of the 1920s when the Soviet leaders turned to New Economic Policy after the government's attempt to shape and control the economy under a policy of war communism had failed. Public diplomacy was also sought to contribute to development of trade through building relations with representatives of foreign business circles, through organization of fairs and exhibitions abroad.

The Soviet Consulate and Trade Mission were open in Seoul following the establishment of Soviet-Japanese diplomatic relations in 1925. However it should be admitted that the volume of the Soviet trade with colonial Korea in the 1920s, as it is illustrated in the **Table 1**, remained extremely low; the majority of items were not even traded on a regular basis. Development of the bilateral economic ties was hindered by Japanese control over all the Korean export-import transactions.

**Table 1. Import from Korea to the USSR 1924-1928**

Items	1924/25		1925/26		1926/27		1927/28	
	Ton	Thousand Rubles						
Total	29	14	15	17	86	108	17	35
Ships							17	35
Paper	1	7						
Medicinal herbs			15	17				
Flax					4	17		
Cattle					69	84		
Salt	28	7						

**Source:** СССР и Корея. – М. ГПБЛ, 1988, pp.62-65.

Interestingly, it was the department of VOKS in Shanghai that maintained intensive contacts with the people of the Korean peninsula. So, in December, 1932, the soviet

representatives in China received a letter from the Korean Sericultural Research Institute located in Shanghai.<sup>8</sup> In the letter, addressed to the Chairman of the USSR People's Commissariat, the Korean entrepreneurs gave detailed information on their Institute and offered their assistance for the improvement of silk production in the Soviet Union. The Korean Sericultural Research Institute, as it was stipulated in the document, was organized in 1929 by Korean specialists in silk production who had graduated from Japanese schools of sericulture.

The Korean Sericultural Institute was eager to disclose to the Soviet state confidential information on the latest Japanese technologies in silk production in order to undermine the economic power of Japan "hoping to strike a heavy economic blow on Japan".<sup>9</sup> In fact, the Korean Sericultural Research Institute was set up in Shanghai with the purpose to develop silk production in countries other than Japan so as to prevent the Japanese from monopolizing the international market.<sup>10</sup>

The Soviet representatives of VOKS received an offer from Korean Sericultural specialists with great enthusiasm and responded promptly by organizing collaboration with the Middle Asia Sericultural Institute in Tashkent and the State Scientific Research Institute on Silk Breeding in Tiflis. Interestingly, apart from inquiry on technological issues in silk breeding, the Soviet researchers requested Korean specialists to assist them with obtaining professional literature from Japan since their repeated attempts to obtain Japanese books failed "owing to the difficulty of relations with this country."<sup>11</sup>

The correspondence between the Korean Sericultural Research Institute in Shanghai and the All-Union Association for Cultural Ties Abroad presents evidence of Soviet-Korean ties via

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<sup>8</sup> A letter from the Korean Sericultural Research Institute to Chairman, People's Commissariat, USSR, Shanghai, Dec 15, 1932-Russian State Archive (GARF), fond 5213/4/122.

<sup>9</sup> A letter from the Korean Sericultural Research Institute to Chairman, People's Commissariat, USSR, Shanghai, Dec 15, 1932-Russian State Archive (GARF), fond 5213/4/122.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1930s the Japanese sericulture was dominating the world with its exports of silk-yarn and silk amounting to 1000 million yen a year. Since silk production was a sector of fundamental importance for the economy of the Empire, the Japanese government was attempting to monopolize the market by preventing their methods being copied and by obstructing development of sericulture in other countries. For this reason foreign students including Chinese were barred from Japanese sericultural schools since 1929. However, as it appears from the letter, the Korean students being formally imperial subjects could easily get access to the latest Japanese technology and methods.

<sup>11</sup> A letter from the Korean Sericultural Research Institute to Chairman, People's Commissariat, USSR, Shanghai, Dec 15, 1932-Russian State Archive (GARF), fond 5213/4/122.

non-government channels during the colonial period. It would seem that Koreans educated in Japan in the 1930s not only were aware of the Soviet state, but were informed on government structures and on some agendas – namely the Soviet government striving to pursue economic development and ties abroad. Strong anti-Japanese sentiments in the Soviet Union also might have prompted the Koreans to initiate contacts with the Soviet government.

## **6. Conclusion**

Soviet public diplomacy in the colonial Korea was implemented in three capacities: ideological, cultural and “relationship building.” These roles reflected the multifaceted goals of Soviet foreign policy. The early Soviet public diplomacy activities in colonial Korea were conducted both by state and non-state actors. The Communist Bolshevik Party supported the activities of Korean communists and members of the Korean Diaspora in Russia with the long-term goal of spreading communism to the Far East.

Within the ideological capacity, the USSR supported local communist and national liberation movements with the purpose to expand communism internationally. These ideological objectives dominated Soviet public diplomacy in the 1920s and advocated spreading “world communism” through global revolution as well as proletarian internationalism.

Given that the concept of peaceful coexistence between states with different political systems became a guiding principle for the USSR during the New Economic Policies (NEP) period in the mid-1920s, cultural and “relationship building” objectives started to play an increasingly significant role in Soviet diplomacy. The Soviet state aimed at providing positive information on the life and culture of the USSR and on Soviet achievements in order to attract a foreign audience with the image of a powerful and influential state that also demonstrated the “advantages” of socialism. Simultaneously, through its public diplomacy initiatives the Soviet Union intended to raise awareness of the “good will” of the Soviet people and to establish new channels for communication. In doing so, the Soviet state pursued the goal of relationship building through public diplomacy.

After establishing diplomatic relations with Japan in 1925, the Soviet government gained access to official channels for the implementation of its public diplomacy on the territory of Japan and Korea. These channels included the Soviet Embassy in Tokyo and also the Soviet Consulate and Trade Mission in Seoul, which were opened in Seoul in 1925. The Soviet diplomats and officials were assisting with public diplomacy activities such as distribution of literature, organization of exhibitions, maintaining contact with pro-Soviet organizations, among other activities.

Soviet culture and education evolved as soft power assets in the mid-1920s. Intelligentsia in Korea was lured by Russian and Soviet writers such as Lev Tolstoy, Maxim Gorky and others. The Soviet literature and culture accessed Korea through Japan. The research revealed that the officials of the Soviet consulate in Seoul took an active part in increasing the awareness of life and culture in the Soviet Union among Korean people.

As the Soviet state recovered from the devastation of the Civil war by the mid-1920s, and developed further, economy became a meaningful asset of soft power in foreign policy. The public diplomacy initiatives such as industrial fairs in Tokyo were meant to project an image of the Soviet Union as an economically powerful country and trustworthy trade partner.

Ideology remained the key soft power asset for the Soviet state. Marxist thinking and its practical realization attracted representatives of the leftist movement in Asia, including Korea. Bolshevik's support for national-liberation movements also arouses sympathy among the people of colonial Korea. However, the overall influence of communist ideology as a primary resource of the Soviet soft power remained limited in Korea, partly due to the severe oppression of Korean communists by Japanese authorities.

### **Archival Holdings**

Report "Our friends in Japan" at State Archive of Russian Federation (GARF), Fond 5283 (VOKS) on microfilm 5283-4-27 (1).

A letter from the Korean Sericultural Research Institute to Chairman, People's Commissariat, USSR, Shanghai, Dec 15, 1932-Russian State Archive (GARF), fond 5213/4/122.

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