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Korean Independence Activist Kim Kyung — Cheon: a Biographical Narrative

The article reconstructs the biography of Kim Kyung-cheon (김경천, 1888–1942), a Korean military and public figure, with a focus on his role in the anti-Japanese resistance, the history of Korean emigration, and the history of the Korean diaspora in the USSR and the Republic of Kazakhstan. Drawing on a wide range of sources — archival documents, diaries and memoirs of contemporaries, archival materials, as well as scholarly publications by Korean and Kazakhstani researchers — the study analyzes Kim Kyung-cheon’s participation in the formation of Korean partisan units in the Russian Far East, his interactions with Soviet authorities, and his tragic death in the GULAG. The novelty of the research lies in its narrative-biographical and transnational approach: Kim Kyung-cheon’s personality is examined as a point of intersection of the histories of Korea, Kazakhstan, and Russia, reflecting specific features of Soviet state policies toward certain national minorities. The study employs historiographical analysis, the narrative method, the biographical approach, microhistory, and a transnational perspective, which together make it possible to identify links between the protagonist’s personal experience and the broader political context of the era. The findings are significant for historical scholarship, as they contribute to a deeper understanding of interethnic relations and to a rethinking of memory regarding repression and anti-colonial movements across the post-Soviet space.

Keywords: anti-colonial movement, military history, emigration, Korean diaspora, Soviet nationality policy, political repression, deportation, historical memory, transnational history, biographical approach, microhistory, narrative method.

Introduction

Kim Kyung-cheon was an outstanding Korean military and political figure whose life became a legend of the anti-Japanese resistance. He is known as the “general on a white horse,” a commander who inspired fear in his enemies through rapid cavalry attacks. For his brilliant tactical abilities and indomitable will to victory, contemporaries compared him to Napoleon Bonaparte. Already in his youth, Japanese instructors nicknamed Kim Kyung-cheon the “second Napoleon”, having noticed his fascination with the biography of the French emperor and his desire to emulate him. Kim Kyung-cheon followed a path from an officer of the Japanese army to one of the leaders of the Korean liberation movement, fighting in the Russian Far East. Of particular importance is the period of his life connected with the Soviet Union: his participation in the Civil War in Primorye, his service as an instructor in Vladivostok, and the subsequent tragic events — Stalinist repressions, the deportation of Koreans to Central Asia, and political persecution.

Born into a Korean aristocratic family, he graduated at a young age from the Imperial Japanese Military Academy. After the intensification of Japanese pressure on Korea, and especially following the popular uprisings of March 1919, Kim Kyung-cheon moved to Manchuria and later to the Russian Far East, where he formed armed resistance units against the Japanese occupation. The fate of Kim Kyung-cheon subsequently became closely intertwined with Soviet nationality policy. In the late 1930s, active leaders of the Korean community in the Soviet Far East, including Kim Kyung-cheon, came under the scope of Soviet repression.

The figure of Kim Kyung-cheon is relevant for historical research for several reasons. First, his biography belongs simultaneously to the histories of Korea, Kazakhstan, and Russia: he was both a participant in the Korean anti-colonial movement and a citizen of the USSR, whose descendants today live in Kazakhstan, which emphasizes the transboundary nature of the processes under study. Second, the study of his biography sheds light on little-studied pages in the history of the Korean diaspora (Koryo-saram) and Soviet nationality policy. Finally, the memory of such figures influences contemporary interethnic relations and historical memory; the analysis of Kim Kyung-cheon’s microhistory helps to understand how an individual fate reflects broader tendencies of the era.

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Materials and Methods

The study is based on a wide range of written sources and publications. In particular, archival materials were examined, including personal files preserved in the Archive of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan. These were supplemented by published collections (martyrologies) of victims of political repression, which draw on investigative and archival materials from the State Archive of the Russian Federation, the Central Archive of the Federal Security Service, and the archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Memoirs and personal diaries of Kim Kyung-cheon and his contemporaries were also studied, as well as publications by descendants and family members, including recollections of relatives, letters, and photographs. Of particular importance was the book *Choice*. The *Diary of Kim Kyung-cheon*, which contains a Russian translation of his diary entries. It includes memoirs by family members concerning his military and partisan activities, authorial maps, and a photographic archive. In addition, published memoirs and diary records of Korean participants in the liberation movement in Russia and Kazakhstan were used.

The source base also includes scholarly studies and publications. These comprise works on the history of Koreans in the USSR, contemporary monographs on the partisan movement, and articles on the history of the Russian Far East and Siberia. The research consistently employed the following set of methodological approaches.

The basis of this method is a review and critical assessment of existing literature on the Korean national liberation movement and the fates of deported Koreans in the USSR. This made it possible to correlate the present study with the works of Soviet and post-Soviet scholarship, to identify contradictions (for example, ideologized assessments of the period and the roles of individual figures), and to note gaps in the coverage of Kim Kyung-cheon's biography. Publications representing different research traditions (Russian, Korean, and Kazakhstani) were analyzed, as well as the continuity of interpretations, which is essential for an accurate understanding of the historical context.

The use of personal documents and life narratives makes it possible to link an individual fate with major historical events. The biographical approach emphasizes accounts by contemporaries and descendants of Kim Kyung-cheon, which helps to reconstruct the chronology of his activities and his worldview. This narrative method renders historical events vivid through the prism of a specific participant, revealing motivations, experiences, and personal ties.

The study also applies a "history of small scale" approach: a thorough and in-depth examination of the life of a single individual as a means of identifying general tendencies and representations of the era. Microhistorical analysis makes it possible to see how major processes — such as the Japanese occupation of Korea, the Civil War in the Russian Far East, and Stalinist repression — affected an individual. The focus is placed on concrete details, including diary episodes, the specific features of partisan combat, and the everyday life of special settlers, which enriches the picture of the era. This approach helps to understand the manifestation of macrohistorical forces at the individual level.

The fate of Kim Kyung-cheon developed at the intersection of Korean, Russian, and Kazakhstani history. Transnational analysis considers his life as part of processes that go beyond the boundaries of a single state. Using this approach, intercultural interaction and migration were examined, including his movement from Korea to Manchuria, his subsequent partisan struggle in the Soviet Far East, and his deportation to Kazakhstan. The transnational approach is aimed at studying new forms and practices of intercultural interaction carried out across and beyond national borders. Within this logic, Kim Kyung-cheon is viewed as a historical actor whose activities connect the histories of Korea, Kazakhstan, and Russia.

The comparison of different historical trajectories, primarily those of Kim Kyung-cheon's descendants, makes it possible to identify both typical and unique features. Comparative historical research helps to construct explanations by examining phenomena across different periods and geographical locations.

The combination of these approaches is determined by the complexity of the topic. Biographical and microhistorical methods make it possible to gain deep insight into the personality of Kim Kyung-cheon, to reveal his motivations and concrete life circumstances. Historiographical analysis is necessary in order to integrate the findings into scholarly debate, to avoid repeating errors of earlier interpretations, and to fill gaps in existing knowledge. The transnational approach is justified by the fact that Kim Kyung-cheon's personality is organically linked to the history of several countries; without considering this multidimensionality, there is a risk of excluding the influence of external factors. Comparative analysis serves as a test of the robustness of conclusions and helps to view the situation more broadly, within a macrohistorical context.

Interdisciplinarity enhances the reliability of the results: thus, the social context of resettled ethnic communities or the political logic of repression in the USSR becomes clearer through engagement with works on nationality policy and sociology. Overall, such an ensemble of methods makes it possible to minimize contextual distortion to the greatest extent: each method complements the others, enriches interpretation, and strengthens the validity of conclusions regarding the fate of Kim Kyung-cheon and his historical role.

Results

Kim Kyung-cheon (birth name: Kim Ŭn-ch'ŏn) was born on June 5, 1888, in the village of Somunwe, Bukchŏn County, North Hamgyŏng Province, in northern Korea. His family belonged to the yangban (military-aristocratic) estate; his father, Kim Chŏng-u, was a hereditary military officer. From an early age, Kim Kyung-cheon distinguished himself by determination and a strong inclination toward military affairs. In 1907, he went to Japan as a cadet and enrolled in the Higher Officers' School of the Imperial Japanese Army in Tokyo, from which he successfully graduated in 1910. "I was the only Korean among 650 cadets," Kim Kyung-cheon later noted with a certain sense of pride in his diary. After graduating from the school, he received an officer's rank and served as a lieutenant in the 1st Cavalry Regiment of the Tokyo Garrison Division of the Japanese Army [1].

Kim Kyung-cheon's internal path toward the ideas of national liberation began during his studies in Japan. A decisive turning point for him was his acquaintance with the biography of Napoleon. While still a cadet, Kim Kyung-cheon became engrossed in a book about the life of the great commander, reading it at night by the light of a kerosene lamp and drawing inspiration from his exploits. From that time onward, by his own admission, he became a passionate admirer of Napoleon and sought to emulate him in everything — from his way of life to his military career. Fellow cadets remarked that Kim Kyung-cheon behaved like a "second Napoleon," and even a Japanese instructor gave him this nickname. This fascination was not mere romanticism: the future general developed a firm conviction that Korea needed its own talented military leader capable of liberating the nation [2; 17].

In the spring of 1914, Kim Kyung-cheon was promoted to the rank of senior lieutenant in the Japanese Army. He continued to refine his military skills, completing courses in horseback riding and fencing and studying military engineering. Over 16 years of service (nine of which were spent in officer rank), Kim Kyung-cheon thoroughly mastered strategy and tactics and studied the psychology of the Japanese army — all of which he intended to turn against the Japanese occupiers in the future. While in Tokyo, Kim Kyung-cheon became closely associated with circles of progressive-minded Korean youth, with whom he discussed plans for the liberation of Korea. These clandestine groups prepared for the day when the banner of the struggle for independence could be raised openly.

In 1919, events unfolded in Korea that ultimately determined Kim Kyung-cheon's fate. On March 1, 1919, a nationwide independence movement began — the March First Movement. Shortly after these events, Kim Kyung-cheon left Japanese-controlled territory: together with like-minded associates (among whom were well-known activists Yi Chong-jŏng and Sin Tong-jŏng), he decided to emigrate in order to continue the struggle for Korea's freedom from abroad. In June 1919, Kim Kyung-cheon moved to Manchuria, leaving his homeland for an indefinite period [3; 89].

When making the decision to emigrate, Kim Kyung-cheon was deeply distressed about his family: "I keep telling myself that I have none. But how can that be? They are constantly before my eyes. And that only makes the pain sharper. My unfortunate wife and children. It is I, the head of the family, who am entirely to blame for the fact that they cannot live, like others, a full and happy family life..." [2; 42].

Nevertheless, patriotic considerations prevailed over personal happiness: "Among the entire population of twenty million, one cannot find even by searching in vain someone trained to defend the homeland as I am. Perhaps only my younger brothers from the military academy may become such people in the future. Even in matters of national consciousness, most of these twenty million understand less than I do. And if I, so trained and knowledgeable, were to pity myself and fear risking everything for such a great cause, such an opportunity might never arise again. But if I am brave and resolute, others who previously hesitated will follow me. If, however, I tremble for my own skin, those weaker than I will become even weaker. I am ashamed to live a quiet life. I would feel like a criminal" [2; 40–41].

After arriving in China, Kim Kyung-cheon immediately became involved in the Korean underground movement. In Manchuria, he joined the Korean Youth Independence Association (Taehan Tongnip Ch'ŏngnyŏn-dan, 대한독립청년단) and cooperated with other émigré organizations, establishing contacts with Chinese revolutionaries. However, the main base for further armed struggle lay further north — in the

Russian Far East, where tens of thousands of Koreans resided. By the end of 1919, Kim Kyung-cheon had traveled via Siberia to Vladivostok. There, in Primorye, Korean patriots formed armed partisan units that fought against Japanese troops during the Russian Civil War. Kim Kyung-cheon quickly emerged as one of the leaders of this movement owing to his combat experience and organizational talent.

In the spring of 1920, Kim Kyung-cheon assumed command of a self-defense unit composed of Korean settlers in the Ussuri region. At that time, Chinese bandits known as *hunghazi* constantly terrorized Korean villages in Primorye, looting and killing civilians. By organizing and training a local militia, Kim Kyung-cheon succeeded in clearing the surrounding area of bandit groups, earning the popular nickname “Commander Kim.” He gained particular fame for personally leading his fighters into battle on horseback, riding a white horse — thus giving rise to the legend of the “general on a white horse,” which spread throughout Primorye. Mastering the saber and revolver no less skillfully than any cavalryman, Kim Kyung-cheon inspired trust among his warriors and fear among his enemies.

By early 1921, a unified armed formation numbering approximately 300 men was already operating under his command. This force actively participated in the Civil War on the side of the Red partisans. The key milestones of Kim Kyung-cheon’s military activity during this period are as follows [1].

1920, Primorye. Kim Kyung-cheon was appointed chief commander of the Korean Volunteer Detachment Ch’ŏnhaedan (창해단) in the forested Such’ŏn area near Vladivostok. His unit carried out a successful operation to defeat large *hunghazi* bands, restoring security in Korean villages. For this contribution to the protection of the civilian population, Kim Kyung-cheon came to be respectfully known as Kim Changgun (“General Kim”).

1921, Partisan warfare. In March 1921, near the village of Olga, scattered Korean partisan groups were united into a single detachment. Kim Kyung-cheon was elected commander of the unified partisan formation, which conducted fierce battles against White Guard forces (including the units of General V.M. Molchanov and others) in southern Primorye. Under his leadership, the partisans achieved a number of victories over the Whites and repelled their offensive.

January 1922, Iman. Acting jointly with units of the Red Army, Kim Kyung-cheon’s detachment captured the city of Iman (now Dal’nerechensk), eliminating the last stronghold of the White Guards in northern Primorye. This was a major victory demonstrating the effectiveness of the Korean partisan forces.

July 1922. The Primorye Revolutionary Military Committee officially appointed Kim Kyung-cheon commander of all Korean partisan units in the Posyet District (southwestern Primorye). In effect, he became the commander-in-chief of the Korean national units operating on the southern sector of the Far Eastern front.

October 1922. Following the final withdrawal of Japanese interventionist forces from Primorye, the Korean Revolutionary Liberation Army was formed on the basis of the partisan units. Kim Kyung-cheon was appointed commander of the Eastern Sector of this army, which united Korean partisan units operating along the Soviet–Chinese border. Thus, he assumed leadership of the Korean struggle against the remnants of Japanese influence and bandit formations across a vast territory stretching from Posyet to eastern Manchuria.

By the end of 1922, the situation in the Far East had changed. The Civil War was drawing to a close with the victory of the Reds, and Soviet authorities began the disarmament of allied partisan units. On November 10, 1922, the commander of the Red 5th Army, I.P. Uborevich, issued an order for the disarmament and demobilization of all irregular formations, including Korean partisan units [4; 87]. This decision dealt a severe blow to Kim Kyung-cheon and his comrades: having devoted their lives to the struggle, they suddenly found themselves without a cause. Disillusioned by this turn of events, Kim Kyung-cheon began seeking new ways to continue the liberation movement. In February 1923, he traveled to Shanghai, where he participated in the Conference of the National Assembly of the Provisional Government of Korea (the so-called “Shanghai Congress”). There, Kim Kyung-cheon joined the faction advocating a radical reorganization of the liberation movement. However, the Shanghai Conference failed to meet his expectations: disagreements among émigré leaders only intensified.

After returning from China, Kim Kyung-cheon settled in Vladivostok. In April 1923, he founded the Korean Military Club in Vladivostok — a school for training national officer cadres. Using a textbook of the Imperial Japanese Military Academy that Kim Kyung-cheon himself translated into Korean, approximately 1,000 Korean young men received basic military training at this school. At the same time, Kim Kyung-cheon continued his public activities: in 1926, together with like-minded associates (Yun Hae, Kim Kyu-sik, and others), he established in Vladivostok an organizing committee for the formation of the Korean National Party. However, the committee’s work produced no tangible results due to internal conflicts and the interference

of Soviet authorities, who viewed any form of Korean national self-organization with suspicion. Nevertheless, even without official status, Kim Kyung-cheon did not abandon thoughts of Korea's independence and did everything possible to bring that day closer.

When it became dangerous for Kim Kyung-cheon's family to remain in Japanese-controlled Korea because of his liberation activities, he organized their relocation. Along secret paths, at night, hiding with three children in the bottom of a fishing boat, his wife, Yu Den Hwa, finally arrived in the Far East and reached her husband. Kim Kyung-cheon's reunion with his family took place on July 5, 1925. In his diary, this event is marked by the following entry: "...The loneliest person in the world now lives a happy family life." Here, on August 11, 1927, Kim Kyung-cheon's first son, Su Böm (Vladimir), was born. Then, in 1929, the youngest daughter, Chi Hŭi (Dina), was born, and in 1932 the youngest son, Ki Böm (Gennadii), was born [5; 21].

Kim Kyung-cheon continued to be surrounded by the aura of a legendary partisan commander. Among Koreans in Manchuria and Primorye he was called "백마탄 김장군" ("General Kim riding a white horse"), as well as "擎天金장군" ("General Kim holding up the sky"), in recognition of his outstanding role in protecting the people. His name also resounded in his homeland: the Korean underground press reported on the exploits of the elusive Kim. The Japanese colonial authorities, fearing his influence, disseminated false information about Kim Kyung-cheon's capture or death, yet each time these rumors were disproved by the appearance of the "general on a white horse" in a new sector of the struggle. Through partisan channels of communication, his family in Korea also received news: once, his wife received a newspaper clipping with a photograph of Kim Kyung-cheon among his fighters and a handwritten note: "How are you?" — a conventional sign that he was alive and continued the struggle [6; 19].

After Soviet power was established in the Far East, the position of Korean émigrés changed. Accepting the new political realities, Kim Kyung-cheon remained in the USSR. Although the active phase of armed struggle had ended, he sought to be useful to his people even in peacetime. In the second half of the 1920s, Kim Kyung-cheon settled with his family in Vladivostok (before that, they lived for some time in Khabarovsk). There he engaged in educational work: he taught military affairs and the Japanese language at the newly opened Far Eastern Korean Pedagogical Institute in Vladivostok. His extensive experience and Japanese education proved highly relevant — in the institute, Kim Kyung-cheon trained future teachers and simultaneously oversaw the military training of Korean youth. He again used notes and textbooks that he had translated as early as 1922 to teach a new generation of Koreans discipline and self-defense skills [7; 56].

In addition to teaching, Kim Kyung-cheon continued to follow political life. He kept somewhat apart from factional struggles; however, he maintained contact with former partisan comrades. In the 1930s, a number of his close friends participated in the work of the Korean section under the Far Eastern Regional Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks). Retaining the authority of an anti-imperialist hero, Kim Kyung-cheon could serve as a link between different groups within the Korean diaspora. Under the difficult conditions of emigration, he sought to sustain the morale of his compatriots. According to family recollections, in the mid-1930s, when clouds of repression gathered over the Koreans of the USSR, Kim Kyung-cheon was not afraid to come openly to the families of arrested friends, to express condolences, and to instill hope, saying that one must believe in justice. Thus, until the last peaceful day he remained a moral leader of the Korean community.

However, the overall situation grew increasingly alarming. In 1935–1936, the Stalinist leadership, suspicious of national minorities in border regions, launched a campaign of repression against the Korean intelligentsia in the Far East. Many prominent Koreans — party officials, scholars, and teachers — were struck. Misfortune did not bypass Kim Kyung-cheon's family either. In the autumn of 1936, he himself was arrested by People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD of the USSR) officers on charges of counterrevolutionary activity. Historians note that the precise reasons for his arrest have not been fully clarified: it is possible that intra-party intrigues played a role (at that time, leaders of the so-called "Shanghai group" of Korean communists were being eliminated, and Kim Kyung-cheon may have been mistakenly counted among them). It is also possible that an ordinary false denunciation was decisive — Kim Kyung-cheon had enough ill-wishers who envied his partisan fame. In the context of the mass repressions that began in 1936, anyone could slander anyone, and the legendary general became a vulnerable target. Be that as it may, on September 29, 1936, the Far Eastern military field court sentenced Kim Kyung-cheon under Article 58–12 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR (failure to report) to three years of imprisonment. This was the first crushing blow to the hero's family — according to relatives, the beginning of an "endless chain of tragedies." In 1937, when the deportation of the Korean population began in Primorye, he was still in custody [8; 277].

Meanwhile, in 1936 the family suffered an irreparable loss: Kim Kyung-cheon's 20-year-old daughter, Chi Hye, died suddenly from food poisoning [9]. For his wife, Yu Den Hwa, this blow was especially severe: she remained waiting for her husband, not knowing whether she would ever see him again, and at the same time she lost her daughter. Before the family could recover from grief, a new terrible piece of news arrived, this time striking all Far Eastern Koreans: a decree on the forthcoming expulsion of the Korean population from border areas.

In August–September 1937, the Soviet government forcibly resettled almost the entire Korean population of the Far East (more than 172,000 people) to Central Asia. Kim Kyung-cheon's family was among the tens of thousands sent in freight trains into exile in late autumn 1937. His wife, Yu Den Hwa, and the remaining children left their native places in a state of shock and uncertainty. Before departure, they were allowed to gather only the most essential belongings; much had to be abandoned. According to the testimony of the younger daughter Dina (Korean name: Chi Hŭi), their family lived in Vladivostok until the very last moment; although Kim Kyung-cheon had been arrested, he had taken care in advance that his relatives had documents for relocation. Presumably, thanks to this, Yu Den Hwa and the children safely reached their new place of settlement.

The family's new refuge became the Karaganda Region of the Kazakh SSR [9]. It was precisely there that, in late autumn 1937, the train arrived carrying Kim Kyung-cheon's wife and children along with hundreds of other Korean settlers.

The first months on Kazakhstani soil were extremely difficult for all deported Koreans. People were placed in steppe settlements, often without adequate housing or food supplies. Kim Kyung-cheon's family was assigned to the 3rd state farm "Komintern" of Telman District, Karaganda Region. Yu Den Hwa, who came from a noble family and possessed skills in handicrafts and music-making but did not know the Russian language, was forced to take the simplest work — stoking the stoves in the state-farm bathhouse and working in greenhouses — in order to feed the children. The children — the eldest daughter Vera (Korean name: Chi Ri), son Vladimir (Su Bŏm), and the younger Dina (Chi Hŭi) and Gennadii (Ki Bŏm) — endured hardship together with their mother. Later, Gennadii recalled that the family lived in extreme poverty: there was not enough clothing, and they often went hungry. Despite this, Yu Den Hwa tried to sustain in the children faith in their father and love for the homeland. She told them about Seoul, about Korea's beautiful nature, and traditional holidays — but each time she recalled her native home, she could not hold back tears. For her, the separation from her homeland and her husband was a profound trauma.

The situation of Kim Kyung-cheon himself should be addressed separately. At the time of the family's deportation (late 1937), he remained imprisoned, serving a three-year sentence. It is known with certainty that at the beginning of 1939 Kim Kyung-cheon was free: after serving two and a half years, in February 1939 he was released early from Karlag (Karlag — the Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp of the NKVD, one of the largest camps of the GULAG system). After several years of separation, in March 1939 he finally met his wife and children on Karaganda soil. It was a joyful, yet at the same time bitter meeting: the partisan hero saw the harsh conditions in which his relatives found themselves, deported "to nowhere."

Kim Kyung-cheon did not allow himself to dwell on concerns for long. As a disciplined and responsible person, he immediately became involved in the labor life of the special settlement. Already in March 1939, the former general voluntarily took a job as a worker at the "Komintern" state farm of Telman District, where his family was employed. According to archival data, Kim Kyung-cheon was appointed brigade leader of the state farm's greenhouse operation [2; 148]. Despite his age (50) and health weakened by imprisonment, he worked alongside other special settlers, trying to provide his family with food. The local Korean diaspora, upon learning who had been placed in their barracks, treated him with great respect — after all, among them was the legendary "General Kim," whose exploits many had heard about earlier. According to eyewitness recollections, Kim Kyung-cheon willingly shared his experience with young people, remained military in his composure, and tried to raise the morale of fellow Korean villagers, who were enduring hardships in exile. He encouraged everyone, saying that one must endure and hope for the best. It is possible that precisely this activity — open support for fellow countrymen and an uncompromising attitude toward injustice — attracted the attention of the local NKVD bodies.

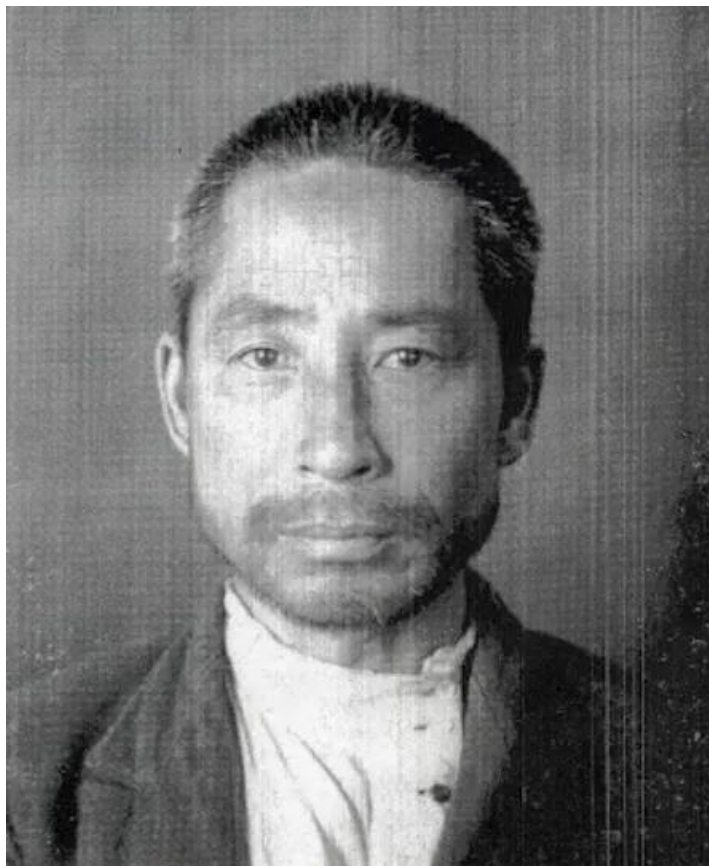


Photo1. Kim Kyung-cheon after his arrest, 1939 [2]

While in Kazakhstan, Kim Kyung-cheon remained at liberty for only a very short time. Merely one month after his release, on April 5, 1939, he was arrested again by the Karaganda Regional Directorate of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs. This time the charge was even more serious — “espionage activities in favor of Japan”, that is, high treason. In effect, the celebrated fighter against Japanese rule was declared a Japanese spy. Kim Kyung-cheon became a victim of the surge of Stalinist repression against Koreans, who were collectively suspected of disloyalty amid the deterioration of Soviet–Japanese relations. Within the NKVD system, he was automatically classified as an “enemy of the people,” as a former officer of the Japanese army and an activist of the national liberation movement. It is also likely that his open expression of indignation over the brutal deportation of Koreans played a role. According to some accounts, he did not conceal his criticism of the “resettlement policy”, for which he paid with his freedom. In any case, a new criminal case was initiated against him in April 1939.

For several weeks, Kim Kyung-cheon was held under investigation in Karaganda — in the internal prison of the NKVD Directorate, as confirmed by the data of his personal file, including an index card discovered by one of the authors of the book, Professor N.O. Dulatbekov, in the Archive of the Department of the Committee for Legal Statistics and Special Records of the General Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan for the Karaganda Region. Archival file no. 01515 contains Kim Kyung-cheon's personal card, which records personal information, including his year of birth (1885), place of birth (the town of Buk-Chen, Korea), and the place of residence of Kim Kyung-cheon and his family in the Karaganda Region — the settlement of No. 13, Telman District. The card also notes his past, indicating that Kim Kyung-cheon had been a former inmate of Karlag and a captain in the Japanese army.

1. Фамилия <u>Ким-Кен-Чен, он-та</u>	Алф. <u>Ким</u>
2. Имя и отчество <u>Ким-Кен-тхен</u>	Контрольные даты
3. Год рожд. <u>1885</u> 4. Место рожд. <u>г.р.</u>	
<u>Бух-Чен (Корея)</u>	
5. Адрес <u>пос. 13, тайманского р-на</u>	Орган <u>Коч МВВД</u>
6. Проф. и спец. _____	Отд. и отд-ние <u>35</u>
7. Занятие _____	Хар. прест. <u>шпионство</u>
и отрасль хоз. _____	Сл. д. № <u>4032</u>
8. Прошлое <u>б/зема. Карелага, капитан японск. арми</u>	Аг. д. № _____
9. Соц. полож. _____ 10. Парт. <u>б/чл. ВКП(б)</u>	Кличка _____
11. Нац. <u>Корея</u> 12. Гражд. <u>СССР</u>	Д. ф. № _____
13. Катег. нач. состава запаса _____	Арх. <u>47. 2042</u>
14. Арестован <u>7/4/39</u> 1939 г. и кем <u>Коч НКВД</u>	Арх. <u>2199/12</u>
15. Содерж. в <u>внутр. тюрьма УМВД</u>	Арх. <u>47. 2042</u>
16. Изм. меры прес. _____	Ф. № <u>L</u>
Ст. ст. УК <u>58-1, 94</u> организ. групп., одиночка (подчеркнуть)	арх. № <u>01515</u>

Photo 2. Personal record card from the case file of Kim Kyung-cheon. Archival file no. 01515 // Archive of the Department of the Committee for Legal Statistics and Special Records of the General Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan

The card further records the date of arrest — April 7, 1939 — and the article under which repeated charges were brought against him — Article 58-1a (“treason against the Motherland, espionage”). This was an exceptionally grave accusation, carrying the highest measure of criminal punishment — the death penalty by shooting — or, under “mitigating circumstances,” deprivation of liberty for a term of ten years with confiscation of property.

It is also known that during this period of imprisonment Kim Kyung-cheon managed to send several letters to his family. In them, the courageous general reassured his wife, wrote that he was innocent and had fallen victim to a misunderstanding, and expressed confidence that the truth would ultimately prevail. He strove to maintain his composure and morale, thereby supporting his loved ones.

In the summer of 1939, Kim Kyung-cheon's case was transferred to Moscow. On June 25, 1939, he was transported from Karaganda to the Butyrka Prison of the NKVD in Moscow. At that time, Butyrka was one of the grimmest prisons, through which thousands of victims of repression passed. Only at the end of the year, on December 17, 1939, did a closed trial of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR take place. Kim Kyung-cheon was charged under paragraph 6 of Article 58 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR — espionage. Lacking any real evidence, the court relied entirely on the materials of the investigation. The verdict was predetermined: eight years of imprisonment in a strict-regime corrective labor camp. The term was calculated from the moment of arrest — April 5, 1939 — meaning that his release could not occur earlier than 1947. Needless to say, there was no question of pardon or mitigation; on the contrary, the case file bore the notation “particularly dangerous counterrevolutionary”, “former inmate of Karlag, captain of the Japanese army”.

After the sentence was pronounced, Kim Kyung-cheon was briefly transferred to the prison in the city of Kotlas (Arkhangelsk Region). Already on January 17, 1940, he was sent by convoy to one of the most remote camps of the GULAG system — Sevzheldorlag (the Northern Railway Camp), located in the Komi Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. This camp had been established for the construction of the strategically important Kotlas–Vorkuta railway, which ran through sparsely populated taiga and tundra. All prisoners of Sevzheldorlag were engaged in heavy earthworks and construction under the harsh climatic conditions of the Arctic North. Kim Kyung-cheon, who turned 52 in 1940, found himself in appalling conditions — ex-

hausting forced labor in the open air, combined with extremely meager rations. Nevertheless, as surviving deported Koreans later recalled, even in the camp he remained steadfast, did not complain, and tried to support his fellow prisoners.

Unfortunately, even this hardened fighter began to lose strength. After spending more than two years working on railway construction, Kim Kyung-cheon's health was severely undermined. The camp regime proved unbearable for a man of his age: daily forced laying of sleepers and rails over many kilometers under convoy supervision, nights spent in cold barracks at temperatures of -40°C , and chronic malnutrition — all of this rapidly destroyed the body. Under such conditions, many prisoners developed serious illnesses. According to NKVD archival data, Kim Kyung-cheon died in the camp in January 1942 from cardiovascular failure (the record states "acute heart failure"). The exact date of death varies across sources: the Korean side has adopted January 2, 1942, as the official date, whereas camp documents record January 14 and January 26 [3; 212]. This discrepancy has not yet been resolved and requires further research, but it is generally accepted that Kim Kyung-cheon died in the first days of January 1942. He died in solitary confinement in the camp prison, never having lived to see his release. The place of his burial is unknown — most likely, his body was interred in one of the anonymous mass graves in the camp cemetery in the taiga. In 2008, the government of the Republic of Korea attempted to locate the hero's grave on the basis of archival data collected by Kim Kyung-cheon's grandson, Yevgenii Kim, but these efforts did not yield results. Thus, the life of a man who devoted himself entirely to the struggle for freedom came to a tragic end.

Discussion

For a long time, the name of Kim Kyung-cheon was deliberately silenced in the Soviet Union. After Stalin's death, the situation began to change. Within the framework of the campaign to restore justice for victims of political repression, Kim Kyung-cheon's case was reconsidered. As early as 1956, a military tribunal reviewed his first sentence of 1936 (three years of imprisonment) and dismissed all charges due to the absence of corpus delicti. Subsequently, the second case was also reviewed. On February 16, 1959, the Military Tribunal of the Moscow Military District reconsidered the 1939 sentence on charges of espionage. By its ruling, the accusation was declared unfounded and the verdict was annulled. On the following day, February 17, 1959, Kim Kyung-cheon was fully rehabilitated posthumously. Thus, seventeen years after his death, his good name was officially restored. For the family, this decision meant the removal of the stigma of being "relatives of an enemy of the people" — at last, they could openly take pride in their father and grandfather.

In independent Kazakhstan, the memory of Kim Kyung-cheon received further recognition. On April 14, 1993, pursuant to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On the Rehabilitation of Victims of Mass Political Repressions", his honor and dignity were rehabilitated at the level of national history. His name was included in the publicly accessible lists of those unjustly repressed. Articles began to appear in the press presenting him as a prominent representative of the Korean diaspora. In 2018, on the occasion of the 130th anniversary of the general's birth, commemorative events were held in Moscow and Kazakhstan with the participation of historians and representatives of the Korean community. In Karaganda, where he spent his last days at liberty, his name was remembered by grateful descendants of deported Koreans.

In his historical homeland, the Republic of Korea, Kim Kyung-cheon's merits were also highly recognized. As early as 1962, he was posthumously awarded the title of "Leader of the National Resistance" in the register of independence fighters. In August 1998, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Korea, the Korean government conferred upon Kim Kyung-cheon a state decoration — the Order of Merit for National Foundation, Presidential (Second) Class (Geon-guk Hunjang Daetongnyeong-jiang). This order is awarded for outstanding contributions to achieving national independence. On August 15, 1998, at a ceremonial event in Seoul, the President of the Republic of Korea, Kim Dae-jung, personally presented the award to the hero's youngest son, Gennadii Kim, who had arrived as part of a delegation of descendants of independence fighters. Receiving his father's order, Gennadii did not conceal his tears of joy and pride. Representatives of the Korean political and academic elite present at the ceremony rose to their feet in applause, greeting the family of the legendary Kim Kyung-cheon — the "general on a white horse," whose name took an honorable place among Korea's national heroes. Subsequently, the Korean government repeatedly invited Kim Kyung-cheon's descendants to visit their historical homeland; such visits took place in 1998 and 2001 and became deeply emotional events for the family.

Special attention should be given to the unique documentary contribution to preserving the general's memory — the publication of his personal diary. During his arrest in 1939, Kim Kyung-cheon had a leather briefcase confiscated, containing various papers, including diary entries from different years. These manu-

scripts were kept for decades in special KGB archives and became accessible only in recent times. In 2005, the general's grandchildren living in Kazakhstan located their grandfather's diary in the Archive of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Karaganda. It was established that the entries were written by Kim Kyung-cheon in Korean in the 1920s and also included a notebook with poems and reflections. His grandson, Yevgenii Petrovich Kim, succeeded in having the diary translated into modern Korean and published in Seoul in 2012. Later, for the 130th anniversary of the hero's birth, the diary was translated into Russian (translation by K.A. Yugai) and published as a separate book, *Choice: The Diary of Kim Kyung-cheon...*, in Moscow in 2018. Supplemented with family memoirs, this volume constitutes an invaluable historical source — the perspective of Kim Kyung-cheon himself on his life and his era. The publication of the diary generated considerable interest among scholars of Koryo-saram and all those interested in the history of the Korean liberation movement. After many decades, the voice of the “Korean Napoleon” was finally heard and duly appreciated.

The fate of Kim Kyung-cheon's family after his death was typical of many deported Koreans, yet marked by a special reverence for their great ancestor. His wife, Yu Den Hwa, spent the rest of her life in Karaganda. She raised the children under the difficult conditions of postwar Kazakhstan, striving to provide them with education and to preserve Korean traditions. Yu Den Hwa always believed in her husband's innocence. She proudly refused a survivor's pension for her deceased husband, saying: “Why would I need a pension? I need the person dear to my heart...”. Yu Den Hwa was buried in Karaganda.

Kim Kyung-cheon's children settled in the Karaganda Region and contributed to the development of the region and the Korean diaspora. The eldest son, Vladimir Ivanovich Kim (Korean name: Su Bōm), born in 1926, lived through the war as an adolescent. He worked in Karaganda, acquired a profession, labored for many years, and raised a family. His descendants currently live in Kazakhstan and Russia.

After Stalin's death, in the second half of the 1950s, a gradual process of rehabilitating victims of political repression began. During this period, the Kim family in Karaganda was located by Matvei Timofeevich Kim, a former partisan of Kim Kyung-cheon's detachment who later became a writer. He spent nights talking with the widow Yu Den Hwa, recalling combat episodes and telling the children about their father's exploits. Matvei T. Kim authored the book *Korean Internationalists in the Struggle for Soviet Power in the Far East (1918–1922)*, published in Moscow in 1979, in which he devoted a separate chapter to Kim Kyung-cheon [4]. Unfortunately, M.T. Kim did not manage to realize his plan to publish a separate biography of Kim Kyung-cheon. Nevertheless, thanks to his efforts, the general's name began to resurface — initially among a narrow circle of Soviet Korean studies scholars, and by the end of the century more broadly.

The eldest daughter, Vera Ivanovna Kim (Korean name: Chi Ri), played a significant role in preserving the family during deportation. It was she who helped her mother and younger siblings move from the aul to Karaganda in the spring of 1941 — finding work in the city and bringing the family out of the state farm. Vera, like her mother, worked throughout her life and raised children. Her eldest son, Yevgenii Petrovich Kim, later became the researcher who first systematized information about his legendary grandfather. An engineer and local historian, Yevgenii Kim began collecting documents in his youth, persistently seeking archival information about the repressed general. In 2001, he applied to the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan and obtained access to his grandfather's investigative file. Owing to his efforts, the following books were published: *Kim Kyung-cheon (Karaganda, 2005)*, *A Fighter for Korea's Independence (Karaganda, 2008)*, and *The Oath (Karaganda, 2009)* — the first studies in Kazakhstan devoted to Kim Kyung-cheon's life. In these works, E.P. Kim published family recollections, archival documents, and photographs. In effect, Yevgenii Petrovich fulfilled his vow — to restore his grandfather's good name to the people. He also became one of the compilers of the Russian edition of the diary (2018), supplementing it with family narratives.

Dina Ivanovna Kim (Korean name: Chi Hüi), born in 1929, was Kim Kyung-cheon's youngest child. She grew up in Karaganda and obtained a medical education. From her youth, Dina participated in the Korean cultural movement and performed on stage. Until retirement, she worked as a physician and simultaneously engaged in active public work, striving to tell younger generations about her father's feat. In 1998, Dina Ivanovna accompanied her brother Gennadii on a trip to Seoul for the ceremony at which their father was awarded the order. This journey to the land of their ancestors was deeply moving for her: standing on Korean soil, she felt a spiritual connection with her heroic father and pride in her people. Later, Dina Kim took an active part in the public life of the Karaganda Korean cultural center. Her recollections formed the basis of many chapters of the family chronicle. She lived to see the publication of her father's diary and held in her hands the book containing his words — an experience that brought her great consolation.

In September 2025, the authors of this article visited the graves of Dina Ivanovna Kim and her mother, Yu Den Hwa, the wife of Kim Kyung-cheon. The scholars met with the legendary general's grandson, Valerii Vital'evich Kim, the son of Dina Ivanovna, and his wife, Sofiiia Frantsevna Kliver.

According to information obtained, Sofiiia Frantsevna has lived in Karaganda since 1985. In her words, during the last six years of her life Dina Ivanovna lived with them. "After my mother-in-law suffered her first stroke, we decided to take her into our home. I always called Dina Ivanovna "mother," although she would say that there is only one mother — the one who gave birth. I would like to share my memories of what Dina Ivanovna was like. First of all, she spoke three languages — Russian, Korean, and German, and she knew German very well, no worse than I do. She often sang songs in Korean. Mother was a cutter and seamstress — she sewed beautiful and fashionable clothes, and at one point she was asked to teach, because no one could design and sew better than she did. She taught this craft to many students, who are surely grateful to her. My relationship with Dina Ivanovna was always good. When she learned that I would become Valera's wife, she reacted positively, saying that Germans are generally tidy, which meant that her son would always be fed and neatly dressed. Moreover, in the Far East a German family lived next door to them, with whom her parents were friends and whose home they visited, meaning they were familiar with German culture, traditions, and everyday life. And Dina Ivanovna was also strict, fair, and honest."

The Kim family has three children — two daughters and a son — as well as three grandchildren, with a fourth to be born soon. The children were raised in both Korean and German traditions. Sofiiia Frantsevna has extensive experience in upbringing — prior to retirement she worked as a kindergarten teacher.

The youngest son, Gennadii Ivanovich Kim (Korean name: Kim Ki Böm), was also born in the Soviet Union — in Khabarovsk in 1932. He was only five years old at the time of deportation and ten when his father died. Gennadii grew up in Karaganda and from childhood absorbed stories of his father's heroic deeds. He sought to resemble him in all respects: he was disciplined, engaged in sports, and was not afraid of difficulties. Like his illustrious father, Gennadii dreamed of becoming a military officer, but in 1950 the military academy refused his application "on the grounds of nationality" (at that time, Koreans were effectively barred from military service). He therefore chose another noble path — medicine. In 1954, Gennadii Kim entered the Faculty of Medicine of the Karaganda Medical Institute. After graduating, he worked as a phthisiatrician (a tuberculosis specialist), and later as a radiologist, earning well-deserved professional authority. At the same time, Gennadii Ivanovich contributed significantly to the development of amateur sports: he organized the running enthusiasts' club "Fedeniks" at the Shakhtyor sports club in Karaganda, personally participated in marathons and ski races, and inspired young people by his own example. For his labor on the virgin lands, he was awarded the medal "For the Development of Virgin Lands." He raised two daughters who also became physicians and inherited a love for sports: the elder, Elena, became a Master of Sport in fencing, while the younger, Galina, achieved the rank of Candidate for Master of Sport. Gennadii Ivanovich preserved his father's belongings — photographs, letters, and the Order of the Red Banner, which Kim Kyung-cheon had received for battles in Primorye (this order was later donated by the family to a museum). For Gennadii, the rehabilitation of his father's name, and especially the award from Korea in 1998, was a source of profound happiness. As he said, "Now I can look proudly at my father's portrait — his feat has been recognized by the whole world." Gennadii Ivanovich passed away in the early 2000s, having made a substantial contribution to preserving his father's memory and becoming one of the prominent figures of the Korean community in Kazakhstan.

Today, the memory of Kim Kyung-cheon is carefully preserved by his descendants. His grandchildren and great-grandchildren live in Karaganda. The family has transferred part of the relics to the Museum of Memory of the Victims of Political Repressions of Karlag (the settlement of Dolinka, Karaganda Region), where a special display dedicated to Kim Kyung-cheon has been established. Every year, representatives of the Korean diaspora lay flowers at memorials to the victims of repression, commemorating the "general on a white horse." His biography has been included in textbooks on the history of Koreans in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstani scholars of Korean studies, such as Professor G.N. Kim and Professor G.V. Kan, have devoted attention in their works to Kim Kyung-cheon's role in the history of the diaspora. In Korea, he is officially recognized as one of the founding figures of the national liberation movement. In Seoul, his name is engraved on the Wall of Remembrance of Independence Fighters (plaque no. 234). Thus, Kim Kyung-cheon's life path — from a Korean aristocrat to a Soviet prisoner — has been permanently inscribed in the chronicle of the twentieth century as an example of selfless struggle for the freedom of his people.

Conclusions

Kim Kyung-cheon lived only 53 years, yet his biography is extraordinarily rich in events of historical significance. He fought for the freedom of his homeland against Japanese colonialism, protected the civilian population from bandit violence, and sought to unite the fragmented forces of the émigré community in the struggle for Korea's independence. He was called the “Korean Napoleon” not only for his military talent, but also for his ability to inspire people with faith in their country. His tragic death in a Stalinist labor camp did not erase his memory: his family preserved the story of the hero, and his descendants succeeded in restoring his good name.

Today, Kim Kyung-cheon is recognized as a national hero of Korea and an important historical figure. His life symbolizes the inseparable connection between Korean and Kazakhstani history and serves as evidence of how the destinies of peoples became intertwined in the harsh trials of the twentieth century. The story of the “general on a white horse” continues to offer a powerful moral lesson for younger generations, embodying courage, patriotism, and unwavering commitment to the ideals of freedom.

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Ким Ген Чен Корея тәуелсіздігі үшін күрескер: өмірбаяндық белесі

Мақалада корейлік әскери әрі қоғам қайраткері Ким Ген Ченнің (김경천, 1888–1942) өмірбаяны қарастырылған, оның жапон отаршылдығына қарсы күресі, корейлердің эмиграциясы КСРО мен Қазақстан Республикасындағы корей диаспорасының тарихы тұрғысынан қайта зерделенген. Кең ауқымды дереккөздер негізінде, оның ішінде мұрағат құжаттары мен материалдар, күнделіктер мен замандастарының естеліктері, сондай-ақ корей және қазақстандық зерттеушілердің ғылыми жарияланымдары, Қиыр Шығыста корей партизандық жасақтарын қалыптастыруға Ким Ген Ченнің қатысуы, оның кеңестік билік органдарымен өзара әрекеттестігі және ГУЛАГ-тағы қасіретті қазасы талданған. Зерттеудің жаңалығы — өмірбаяндық және трансұлттық тәсілден тұрады. Ким Ген Ченнің тұлғасы Кеңес мемлекетінің бірқатар ұлттық азшылықтарға қатысты саясатының ерекшеліктерін көрсететін Корея, Қазақстан және Ресей тарихының тоғысу нүктесі ретінде қарастырылған. Тарихнамалық талдау, баяндау, өмірбаяндық, микротарихтық тәсілдер және трансұлттық перспектива қолданылды, бұл кейіпкердің жеке тәжірибесі мен дәуірдің жалпы саяси контексті арасындағы

байланысты анықтауға мүмкіндік береді. Алынған нәтижелер тарихи ғылым үшін маңызды, өйткені олар этносаралық байланыстарды терең түсінуге және бұрынғы КСРО кеңістігіндегі репрессиялар мен отаршылдыққа қарсы қозғалыстар туралы тарихи жақты қайта пайымдауға жәрдемдеседі.

Кілт сөздер: отаршылдыққа қарсы қозғалыс, әскери тарих, эмиграция, корей диаспорасы, кеңестік ұлттық саясат, саяси репрессиялар, депортация, тарихи жады, трансұлттық тарих, биографиялық тәсіл, микротарих, нарративтік әдіс.

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Борец за независимость Кореи Ким Ген Чен: биографический сюжет

В статье реконструируется биография Ким Ген Чена (김경천, 1888–1942), корейского военного и общественного деятеля, в контексте его роли в антияпонском сопротивлении, истории эмиграции корейцев и истории корейской диаспоры СССР и Республики Казахстан. На основе широкого круга источников — архивных документов, дневников и воспоминаний современников, архивных материалов, а также научных публикаций корейских и казахстанских исследователей, анализируется участие Ким Ген Чена в формировании корейских партизанских отрядов на Дальнем Востоке, его взаимодействие с органами советской власти и трагическая гибель в ГУЛАГе. Новизна исследования состоит в нарративно-биографическом и транснациональном подходе: личность Ким Ген Чена рассматривается как точка пересечения историй Кореи, Казахстана и России, отражающая особенности политики Советского государства в отношении ряда национальных меньшинств. Применены историографический анализ, нарративный метод, биографический подход, микроисторический подход и транснациональная перспектива, что позволяет выявить связи между личным опытом героя и общим политическим контекстом эпохи. Полученные результаты важны для исторической науки, поскольку способствуют лучшему пониманию межэтнических связей и переосмыслению памяти о репрессиях и антиколониальных движениях на пространстве бывшего СССР.

Ключевые слова: антиколониальное движение, военная история, эмиграция, корейская диаспора, советская национальная политика, политические репрессии, депортация, историческая память, транснациональная история, биографический подход, микроистория, нарративный метод.

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