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Repressive Policy as a Tool of Resolving the “Chinese Issue” in the USSR in the 1930s

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Abstract: The authors analyze the dynamics of repressions in the 1920–1930s towards Chinese people permanently residing on the territory of the USSR. There is illustrated the interdependence of the naturalization of the Chinese and the punitive policy. It is shown that in the period of 1929–1936 there were several anti-Chinese campaigns in the Far East and Siberia, and there is given an assessment of their consequences. The authors refute the hypothesis of conducting a special “Chinese” operation in the USSR during the Great Terror of 1937–1938. Based on the materials of extrajudicial bodies and reporting statistics of the NKVD, it is concluded that this category of the population was referred to two “national” categories, namely, “Harbin” and “mixed.” It is proved that from February 1938 terror against the Chinese was escalated, but only in September 1938 did an independent “Chinese” category appear in the statistics of the NKVD; in total, during the years of the Great Terror, about 18,000 Chinese underwent “national” punitive actions. Repressions against them were justified by a single logic implemented in relation to foreign nationals, which nevertheless allowed some regions to intensify repressions against certain ethnic groups. It is well documented that the expulsions of Chinese outside the country were widely used; they were organized repressive campaigns. It is concluded that the political repressions and state actions in the field of naturalization led to the reduction in the size of the Chinese diaspora and changed the geography of its settlement.

Keywords: Chinese migrants, citizenship, foreigners, foreign ethnic community, Stalinism


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Репрессивная политика как инструмент решения «китайского вопроса» в СССР в 1930-е гг.

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Аннотация: Исследуется репрессивная политика в отношении постоянно проживавшего на территории СССР китайского населения. Цель исследования состоит в соотнесении массовых репрессий с внешнеполитической ситуацией и внутренней политикой, выявлении причин репрессий в отношении отдельных этнических групп и иностранцев. В этой связи показано, что в период с 1929 по 1938 г. имели место несколько антикитайских репрессивных кампаний, дана оценка их последствий. Авторы опровергают мнение о проведении в СССР в период Большого террора самостоятельной «китайской»

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операции. На материалах протоколов внесудебных инстанций 1937–1938 гг. показано, что данная категория населения подверглась репрессиям в ходе двух «национальных» операций НКВД СССР, а именно «харбинской» и «смешанной». Доказано, что с февраля 1938 г. происходит усиление репрессий в отношении китайского населения, но соответствующая этническая линия оформляется только на заключительном этапе массовых репрессий в сентябре 1938 г. На данный момент есть основания утверждать, что в период Большого террора жертвами «национальных» операций НКВД стало 18 тыс. этнических китайцев, что составило 5 % от общей численности репрессированных по ним. Депортации китайцев в отдаленные районы страны и за ее пределы были самостоятельными кампаниями, но применялись как вид наказания также при реализации «национальных» операций. Делается вывод, что в 1930-е гг. политические репрессии и действия государства в области натурализации привели к сокращению численности китайской диаспоры и изменили географию ее расселения.

Ключевые слова: китайские мигранты, гражданство, иностранцы, иноэтническая община, сталинизм

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Introduction

The increased attention to the issue of Chinese migration in Russian society is largely due to the focus on the problems of external threats and the fear of losing the Far East. It is the issue of threat that increases interest in the topic of ethnic discrimination. For researchers, the Chinese became the object of two opposite realities, when, on the one hand, they are seen as a threat, and on the other hand, as a victim. The issue of the Chinese primarily attracts specialists that study national policy, ethnic entrepreneurship, and political repression. The domestic researchers have made great progress in studying the history of state policy towards the Chinese in the Far East and in analyzing individual discriminatory and repressive campaigns of the late imperial and early Soviet periods. It is the study of the reasons for the repression against the Chinese initiated by the state that has become one of the important issues for historians.

Most Russian researchers are of the opinion that the tough policy of the state, both Russian and Soviet, towards Chinese migrants is due to the problems in the field of regulating migration and integration of Chinese settlers into the host society. The experts discuss the ethnic component in the discriminatory and punitive policy of the state along with social and political motives and factors. The increased attention of the authorities to a certain ethnic minority and conducting targeted discrimination and persecution against it allows using the term “ethnic cleansing,” but it seems to us that such an approach largely offsets the economic, social and national-civil aspects when considering the political repressions in the USSR. In terms of studying the repressions against the Chinese population in the USSR in the 1920–30s, of particular interest are the works of E.N. Chernolutskaya, O.V. Zalesskaya, N.F. Bugai, V.G. Datsyshen and E.G. Kalkaev.

The thesis of the differentiated approach of the Soviet state to ethnic groups and the tendency towards the ethnization of the repressive policy caused a heated discussion among specialists in Soviet history dividing them into supporters and opponents of the concept of “ethnization of Stalinism” proposed by J. Baberovsky.¹ The theme of the rejection of internationalism and the trend towards Russification was actualized by V. Denninghaus.² The work of T. Martin became a significant event in the study of Soviet national policy,

¹ J. Baberowski, *Der rote Terror. Die Geschichte des Stalinismus* (München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2003).

² V. Dyonninghaus, *V teni 'Bol'shogo brata.' Zapadnye natsional'nye men'shinstva v SSSR, 1917–1938 gg.* [In the shadow of ‘Big Brother.’ Western national minorities in the USSR 1917–1938] (Moscow: ROSSPEN Publ., 2011).

but his concept of “positive discrimination” proposed to explain the principles of nation building in the USSR turned out to be relevant only for the analysis of the events of the 1920s.³ At the moment, there is no unequivocal opinion among researchers regarding the reasons for the drastic evolution of Soviet national policy from the early 1930s. The failures in pursuing the policy of sovietization of some ethnic groups and the course towards integration of diasporas speak in favor of the concept of “ethnization of Stalinism,” but this does not provide sufficient grounds to assert targeted repressions on ethnic grounds. A hypothesis is being formed that the repressions were largely due to the low rate of naturalization and the striving to intensify the integration of the diaspora.

The purpose of the article is to show the dependence of the discriminatory and repressive policy towards the Chinese population in the USSR on the foreign policy situation and the needs of domestic policy.

In terms of studying the history of the Chinese diaspora in the USSR, there is a problem of lack of statistical data. Based on this, the study of the repressive policy in the USSR is impossible without the involvement of the NKVD documents including such a mass source as materials from extrajudicial instances. These sources have been deposited in the archives of the FSB and are available to domestic researchers upon receiving the appropriate permission from the department. The FSB Central Archive and the FSB Archive for the Omsk Region contain protocols of the NKVD Commission and the USSR Prosecutor, the authority that made decisions on “national” operations. The use of materials of extrajudicial instances makes it possible to describe the algorithm of individual campaigns and correct the quantitative scale of repression.

Problem of integration of the Chinese into a foreign cultural environment

The Russian state faced the problem of migration from China already in the second half of the 19th century, and at the beginning of the 20th century it became massive. The influx of the Chinese population to the Far East opened up wide opportunities for the use of cheap labor, but it gave rise to an uncontrolled movement of people across the border and led to the emergence of a closed ethnic community. The authorities tried to deal with such an influx, but it continued, which led to the expansion of their presence in the Far East region. With a permanent diaspora of 50-70 thousand people, the number of Chinese in the country was constantly increasing due to the high demand for labor. Following the tsarist government, the Bolsheviks, faced with the “Chinese issue,” were also forced to somehow solve it. Whereas before 1917 the authorities tried to force the Chinese to live in Russia according to the Russian laws, after the revolution they were to live according to the Soviet ones.

After coming to power, the Bolsheviks declared the equality of citizens and foreigners, but at the same time they tried to integrate and naturalize the latter ones. Thus, the Chinese population received some preferences as part of the indigenization policy, which gave it the opportunity to preserve its uniqueness within the framework of national-cultural autonomy on condition of full integration and sovietization. These steps did not yield the expected results; the Chinese in the Soviet Union remained a foreign ethnic and civil group. The traditional strategy for their adaptation in a foreign cultural environment was the formation of a permanent community as a closed and self-sufficient association with its own system of regulation of life. The “less contact – less conflict” strategy worked successfully both in the empire and in the USSR, although it increased the isolation of the Chinese within the diaspora. At the same time, the openness of the border

³ T. Martyn, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Moscow: ROSSPEN Publ., 2011).

made it possible to maintain ties with China. Thus, both the state and the diaspora lived by double standards.⁴

The issue of the number of Chinese in the USSR is complicated, although censuses and population records allow getting an idea of their approximate number. The first all-union census of 1926 recorded 101,7 thousand Chinese in the country,⁵ in particular, in the Far Eastern Territory there lived 77 thousand people. At the same time, V.V. Osinsky (Obolensky), the head of the Central Statistical Bureau of the USSR estimated the size of the diaspora at only 81,8 thousand people.⁶ The subsequent censuses of 1937 and 1939 also showed a significant discrepancy in numbers. Moreover, there were regional and all-Union administrative records, but their data were introduced into scientific use fragmentarily. The analysis of the migration dynamics shows that whereas for the early 1920s an outflow was typical, then from the mid-1920s the Far Eastern migration flows became increasingly important. There was recorded a massive influx of Chinese and Koreans into the USSR, but at the same time, the number of Chinese migrants was still many times less than on the eve of the First World War. Thus, according to the border records, in 1928 23,6 thousand Chinese arrived in the country, and 17,7 thousand people left it.⁷ It is known that in 1928 the Soviet government planned to resort to the mass import of Chinese labor for the needs of the Far East economy, but abandoned this idea. Between 1929 and 1932 the statistics recorded a decrease in the number of Chinese: in 1929 in the Vladivostok district of the Far Eastern Territory there were recorded 42,3 thousand people, and in 1932 (Primorsky region of the Far Eastern Territory) – 32,6 thousand people.⁸ These figures indicate the beginning of the outflow of the Chinese population from the Soviet Union, and a similar trend became apparent by the second half of the 1930s.

Legal status of the Chinese in the USSR

Declaring internationalism, the Soviet government very quickly established the institution of national citizenship. The first Constitutions – the RSFSR of 1918 and the USSR of 1924 – provided ample opportunities for the naturalization of foreigners. However, most Chinese people that permanently resided in the country preferred to retain national citizenship, and the possibility of confirming and prolonging it existed due to the activities of consular institutions. They did not stop functioning after 1917, although Beijing did not recognize the USSR until 1924. The normalization of Soviet-Chinese relations led to the expansion of the consular network. On the territory of the country there functioned the embassy in Moscow, four consulates general (Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Blagoveshchensk, Novosibirsk) and six consulates (Chita, Alma-Ata, Semipalatinsk, Zaisan, Tash-

⁴ This phenomenon was noted in particular N.F. Bugaj. N.F. Bugaj, “Chinese in Soviet Union and Russia: the policy of two standards (1920–1940),” *Istoricheskaya i sotsyal'no-obrazovatel'naya mysl'* 8, no. 1/2 (2016): 52–66.

⁵ *Narodnost' i rodnoi iazyk naseleniia SSSR* [Nationality and native language of the population of the USSR]. Issue 4 of *Vsesoyuznaia perepis' naseleniia. Kratkie svodki / Tsentral'noe statisticheskoe upravlenie SSSR. Otdel perepisi* [All-Union population census. Brief summaries / Central Statistical Office of the USSR. Census Division] (Moscow: TSSU Soiuza SSSR, 1927–1929 (“Mospoligraf” 14-ya tip.) Publ., 1928), 22.

⁶ V.V. Osinskii (Obolenskii), *Mezhdunarodnye i mezhkontinental'nye migratsii v dovoennoi Rossii i SSSR* [International and intercontinental migrations in prewar Russia and the USSR] (Moscow: CSU SSSR Publ., 1928), 96.

⁷ V. Moissenko, “Mezhdunarodnaia migratsiia v Rossii (SSSR) v kontse XIX–pervoi treti XX veka Chast' tret'ia. Mezhdunarodnaia migratsiia v SSSR v 1923–1930 gg. [International migration in Russia (USSR) at the end of the 19th – first third of the 20th century, part three. International migration in the USSR in 1923–1930],” *Demograficheskoe obozrenie* 4, no. 2 (2017): 116.

⁸ E.N. Chernolutskaia, “Konets ‘Millionki’: likvidatsiia kitaiskogo kvartala vo Vladivostoke (1936 g.) [The end of the ‘Millionka’: the liquidation of Chinatown in Vladivostok (1936)],” *Rossii i ATR*, no. 4 (2008): 24.

kent, Andijan). Under the 1924 Soviet law on citizenship, the possession of a valid national passport made it possible to obtain either a residence permit for a foreigner or a residence permit for a person claiming foreign citizenship; foreigners who did not confirm their foreign citizenship and did not declare it were automatically recognized as Soviet citizens. Afterwards, the legal norms of 1930 and 1931 retained the norms on the automatic recognition of a foreigner who did not have a residence permit as a citizen of the USSR.⁹

The state also tried to take external migration under control, but this problem was not solved immediately. Starting from 1923, entry into the USSR became possible only with entry visas issued by plenipotentiaries and consuls of the USSR abroad. In 1923, 2,723 such visas were issued, in 1924 – 4,013, in 1925 – 5,711, in 1926 – 9,567, in 1927 – 11,524.¹⁰ The above figures testify not only to the annual increase in the flow of migrants to the USSR, but also to the positive dynamics in the legalization of migrants.

Visas were issued for three months, six months and a year; a stamp of receiving a visa was put in the national passport. When crossing the border, appropriate stamps were put at checkpoints; in accordance with the visa, the administrative departments of the regional executive committees issued temporary residence permits. It was possible to extend the period of stay in the country only with a valid national passport. In 1926, a mass campaign was launched to issue Soviet residence permits; their introduction made it possible to establish administrative recording of foreigners. By the beginning of 1928, in the Far East Territory there had been issued more than 89,000 Soviet residence permits to Chinese people. From 1930, in the USSR there was introduced a new procedure for issuing residence permits to foreigners: those who did not have national passports could no longer get residence permits.

The Chinese citizens living in the country came under Soviet jurisdiction. The diaspora was characterized by criminality, which was a problem for both Chinese people and the local population. The number of offenses committed by the “Easterners” amounted to 10% of the total crime rate in the USSR; about a quarter of them were violations of the rules of stay in the country. It is important to note that until the mid-1920s the Chinese were not persecuted in the USSR on political grounds.

Tougher policy trend

The position of the Chinese in the USSR largely depended on the international situation. The deterioration of Soviet-Chinese relations at the turn of the 1920–30s caused by the conflict on the CER (Chinese Eastern Railway) provoked a wave of persecution. According to the OGPU order of 20 July 1929, in response to the arrests of Soviet citizens along the right-of-way of the CER, 1-2 thousand Chinese were to be arrested in the Far East and Siberia. In fact, according to various estimates, in July – September 1929, over 8 thousand people were arrested in Khabarovsk and Vladivostok. In addition, they resorted to deportations as a repressive measure. Starting from 1929, the Soviet authorities expelled the Chinese: in Transbaikalia alone, more than 1,300 people were expelled, although it was officially reported that China and the USSR each expelled 354 people.¹¹ In general, the campaign of 1929 can be considered as the beginning of mass repressions in the USSR against the Chinese.

⁹ L.P. Belkovec, “Regulirovanie poriadka dokazatel'stva prav inostrannogo grazhdanstva v SSSR (1930–1950-e gg.) [Regulation of the procedure for proving the rights of foreign citizenship in the USSR (1930–1950)],” *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, no. 338 (2010): 112.

¹⁰ Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Archive of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation] (henceforth AVP RF), f. 0100, op. 12, papka 150, d. 12, l. 2.

¹¹ N.N. Ablazhei, “Konflikt 1929 g. na KVZHD i ego posledstviia [The conflict of 1929 on the CER and its consequences],” *Vestnik NGU. Ser.: Istorija, filologiya* 5, no. 1 (2006): 59.

A new wave of persecution dates back to 1932–33, since from that moment on all foreigners became the object of increased attention of the punitive bodies. The reason was the partial passportization of the population of the USSR which was aimed primarily at the social cleansing of cities by limiting the influx of rural residents and the eviction of the marginal population, which was supposed to reduce the scale of shadow business and crime (the Soviet press called passportization a “severe proletarian filter,” and saw its results in the destruction, primarily in the Far East, of “Millionka” Chinatown, opium dens, brothels, etc.¹²). The passportization could not but affect foreigners, including the Chinese in Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Nikolsk-Ussuriysk, Spassk and Blagoveshchensk. In 1932 not only in the cities, but also in the border areas, there were total inspections of the population, since the passportization was carried out under the OGPU control. Persons who were denied the right to reside were ordered to leave the closed areas within ten days; otherwise they automatically became violators of the passport regime. From August 1933, special troikas were created at the regional authorized representative offices of the OGPU on the basis of departmental circular No. 96; they got the right to use administrative expulsion against such persons.¹³ The “passport” troikas functioned until the end of 1935, then they were replaced by the so-called “militia” troikas. It was the decisions of the “passport” troikas that authorized mass arrests in the cities and the deportation of declassed elements outside the closed areas to remote parts of the country. According to the results of passportization, more than 175 thousand people were expelled for 3–5 years.¹⁴ We cannot name the exact number of the expelled foreign nationals, but it is known that administrative expulsion began to be applied to the Chinese in 1933. They were deported mainly to Kazakhstan and to the north of the Tomsk region.

The passportization coincided with the all-Union re-registration of all foreigners carried out in order to clarify their national-civil status. From then on, all foreigners were divided into two categories: those who had diplomatic missions in the USSR and those who did not have such. With respect to the latter, due to the fact that their status could not be confirmed by national missions, the procedure for confirming the status of a foreigner was extremely difficult, although possible, given that the final decision was made by the republican offices of All-Russian Central Executive Committee. Thus, a new category of foreigners appeared – “refuseniks.” The Chinese were referred to the first category, due to the presence of a network of consular offices in the country; but, firstly, they were to confirm their citizenship as soon as possible, and secondly, there were also “refuseniks” among them: those who had a Soviet residence permit issued in 1926 which turned out to be expired. In the context of the re-registration that had begun, the Chinese applied en masse to the consulates, but the Soviet authorities prohibited all foreign consulates, including Chinese ones, issuing national passports and prolonging citizenship. The ban was lifted only in the autumn of 1936.¹⁵ At the time of registration, the vast majority of Chinese had either national passports (mostly expired) or had no documents at all.¹⁶

¹² E.N. Chernoluskaya, *Prinuditel'nye migratsii na sovetskom dal'nem Vostoke v 1920–1950-e gg.* [Forced Migration in the Soviet Far East in the 1920–1950] (Vladivostok: Dal'nauka Publ., 2011), 138.

¹³ *Massovye repressii v SSSR* [Mass repressions in the USSR]. Vol. 1 of *Istoriia stalinskogo GULAGA* [History of Stalin's GULAG] (Moscow: ROSSPEN Publ., 2004), 156–157.

¹⁴ M.N. Potemkina, and I.V. Kuznetsova, “Paspportizatsiia gorodskogo naseleniia SSSR v 1930-kh gg. [Passportization of the urban population of the USSR in the 1930s],” *Problemy istorii, filologii, kul'tury*, no. 4 (2014): 172.

¹⁵ E.G. Kalkaev, “Kitaiskie migranty mezhdru dvumia narkomatami: istoriia pereregistratsii kitaiskogo naseleniia vostochnykh regionov SSSR v 1936–1937 gg. [Chinese migrants between two people's commissariats: the history of reregistration of the Chinese population of the eastern regions of the USSR in 1936–1937],” *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka*, no. 3 (2022): 112–115.

¹⁶ O.V. Zalesskaya, “Kitaiskie migranty v usloviakh politicheskoi situatsii na Dal'nem Vostoke v kontse 1920-kh – seredine 1930-kh godov [Chinese migrants in the context of the political situation in the Far

The registration campaign of 1932 was intended to stimulate the process of naturalization. The authorities declared the possibility of obtaining citizenship through the simplified procedure. In practice, there gradually emerged a trend towards an increase in the scale of naturalization of the Chinese, but its pace was extremely low, both due to the unwillingness to renounce national citizenship and the lack of documents. The Chinese were accustomed to being in the gray areas of the legal environment and were reluctant to become legalized. Due to the passportization, some of them preferred to move from the cities to the countryside and leave the border areas.¹⁷ The party authorities of the Far East were particularly concerned about the low rate of naturalization of the Chinese population.¹⁸ It should be noted that it was during the census of 1932 that the first total registration of the entire Chinese population of the country was carried out, when, along with Chinese citizens and persons without documents, there were also taken into account naturalized Chinese. In 1934 all foreigners came under the jurisdiction of the NKVD, in whose structure there appeared OVIR – the Visa and Registration Department (before that, their registration had been carried out only by the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs).

The position of the Chinese in the USSR was aggravated by the occupation of northeast China by Japan and the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo. From 1933, the OGPU began to identify individuals and organizations on charges of having links with Japanese intelligence.¹⁹ At the same time, in the USSR there appeared another category of the Chinese population – internees: Chinese soldiers who crossed to the territory of Primorye and Transbaikalia in December 1932 – January 1933; they had refused to submit to the Japanese. The number of internees who were accommodated in Siberia (Naryn, Khakassia and Kuzbass) amounted to about 11 thousand people. In February – May 1933, up to 10 thousand internees were sent through Kazakhstan to Xinjiang; about 700 more people were taken to Western China on the eve of the Great Terror. The remaining 150–300 people were repressed on charges of spying for Japan.

The forced sale of the Chinese Eastern Railway in 1935 provoked new persecution; in particular, the NKVD launched a campaign to eliminate “sabotage-terrorist and intelligence organizations” of Japanese intelligence. It was public security officers of Eastern Siberia and the Far East that reported more often than others on the liquidation of “groups of saboteurs with the participation of the Chinese.”²⁰

In 1936, the repression of the Chinese population reached a new level. In the USSR, there started a new stage of the passportization of the population, within the framework of which an exchange of passports and repeated “cleansing” of cities was carried out. In the large cities of the Far East, which from 1932 belonged to closed areas, measures were taken to ensure the passport regime. A major action was the liquidation of the Chinatown “Millionka” Chinatown in Vladivostok: the only Chinatown in the USSR was

East at the end of the 1920s – middle 1930s],” *Izvestiya Rossiiskogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta im. A.I. Gercena*, no. 86 (2008): 59.

¹⁷ E.N. Chernolutskaia, “Konets ‘Millionki’: likvidatsiia kitaiskogo kvartala vo Vladivostoke (1936 g.) [The end of the ‘Millionka’: the liquidation of Chinatown in Vladivostok (1936)],” *Rossia i ATR*, no. 4 (2008): 29.

¹⁸ A.A. Malenkova, “Politika sovetskikh vlastei v otnoshenii kitaiskoi diaspory na dal'nem Vostoke SSSR v 1920–1930-e gg. [The policy of the Soviet authorities towards the Chinese diaspora in the Far East of the USSR in 1920–1930],” *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka*, no. 4 (2014): 128–129.

¹⁹ N.A. Potapova, “Antikitaiskaia aktsiia NKVD SSSR perioda ‘bol'shogo terrora’ v Dal'nevostochnom krae: mekhanizmy i masshtaby repressii [Anti-Chinese action of the NKVD of the USSR during the ‘great terror’ in the Far Eastern Territory: mechanisms and scales of repression],” *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka*, no. 3 (2018): 157.

²⁰ V.G. Datsyshen, “The Chinese Population of Transbaikalia under the Conditions of the Stalinist System in the 1930s,” *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 21, no. 1 (2022): 67–68.

subject to resettlement and re-profiling. During the operation, about 800 people were arrested, 3,682 people were transported to the border and expelled outside the country. In total, in 1936, about 4,2 thousand people were expelled from the city to China, some fled to the countryside and had a semi-legal way of life.²¹ It can be assumed that similar actions, albeit on a smaller scale, swept through other cities of the Far East as well. By 1936, the Chinese direction in the work of the NKVD had become obvious, but the anti-Chinese campaigns were still of local character. On a national scale, by 1936, several repressive lines had emerged, which were transformed into the so-called national operations, that along with the “kulak” operation carried out by order No. 00447 took a central place in the course of the Great Terror.

Anti-Chinese actions in 1937–38

Today, experts already know quite a lot about the mass repressions of 1937–38, which allows assessing the dynamics of the terror. The ideological justification for the need for mass repressions was given by the February-March Plenum of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks in 1937.²² Broad powers including the right to make extrajudicial decisions were delegated to the NKVD. The large-scale propaganda in just a few months plunged Soviet society into an atmosphere of spy mania and the search for internal enemies. Thus, for example, in the summer of 1937, the “Pravda” newspaper published a large article “Subversive work of Japanese intelligence,” which, on the one hand, summed up some results of the activities of Japanese intelligence on the territory of the USSR, on the other hand, it outlined a new decisive blow against Japanese spies, which was to become total.²³ All this combined ensured the unity of power and society and made the terror “great.”

With regard to foreigners and foreign nationals, the repressive trajectory was as follows. From March 1937, the ground began to be prepared for their further persecution.²⁴ A test campaign to annul Soviet residence permits was carried out in the West Siberian Territory in the spring of 1937 towards German citizens, and in the summer the NKVD adopted a special circular “On Foreigners” ordering the launch of an all-Union campaign on mass refusal to extend Soviet residence permits for foreigners including Chinese subjects. If there was compromising evidence, they were to be expelled from the country.²⁵ In July-September 1937, there were issued the first orders of the NKVD of the USSR as part of national operations – “German,” “Polish” and “Harbin.”²⁶ The latter (No. 00593 of 20 September 1937) sanctioned the arrests and convictions of the so-called Harbin residents, that is, former employees of the CER and re-emigrants. Under this order, in fact, the Chinese accused of espionage for Japan en masse became one of the target groups.

The next step to intensify the persecution against foreigners was the October 1937 order of the NKVD of the USSR No. 00693 according to which there were to begin re-

²¹ E.N. Chernolutskaia, “Konets ‘Millionki,’ 29.

²² *Lubyanka. Stalin i Glavnoe upravlenie gosbezopasnosti NKVD. Arkhiv Stalina. Dokumenty vysshikh organov partiinoi i gosudarstvennoi vlasti. 1937–1938* [Lubyanka. Stalin and the Main Directorate of State Security of the NKVD. Stalin's archive. Documents of the highest bodies of party and state power. 1937–1938] (Moscow: Mezhdunar. fond ‘Demokratiya’; [Yyel’]: Materik Publ., 2004), 95–109.

²³ *Pravda*, July 9–10, 1937.

²⁴ S.A. Papkov, *Obyknovennyi terror. Politika stalinizma v Sibiri* [Ordinary terror. The policy of Stalinism in Siberia] (Moscow: ROSSPEN Publ., 2012), 216.

²⁵ N.A. Potapova, ‘Kharbinskaia’ operatsiia NKVD SSSR 1937–1938 gg.: mekhanizmy, tselevye gruppy i masshtaby repressii [‘Harbinian’ operation of the NKVD of the USSR in 1937–1938: mechanisms, target groups and the scale of repression] (St. Petersburg: Aleteiia Publ., 2020), 36.

²⁶ Tsentral’nyi arkhiv Fedeoal’noi sluzhby bezopasnosti [Central Archives of the Federal Security Service] (henceforth TsA FSB), f. 3, op. 5, d. 2, l. 8–33.

pressions against the so-called defectors.²⁷ In the USSR, the term “defector” was not only widely used, but also had a political and legal status. The defectors were mainly illegal immigrants from the western borders. With regard to the Chinese who were on the territory of the USSR illegally, it began to be applied already in the course of the repressions. In fact, according to the order, all refugees who had ever crossed the Soviet border and had not managed to become legalized were to be repressed.

In total, during the period of the Great Terror, from July 1937 to November 1938, seven orders, memorandums and directives focused on launching national operations got the highest party sanction. These included the “German,” “Polish” and “Harbin” orders, the Latvian and Afghan memorandums, the directive on the Greek operation. On 31 January 1938, by its decision, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks extended the “national” operations intensifying several more directions, including Romanian, Finnish, Estonian, Bulgarian, Macedonian and Chinese.²⁸ By the spring of 1938, the “national” operations had taken the main place in the repressive policy of the USSR: since by that time in many regions the limits on the “kulak” operation had been reached, the emphasis was shifted to the nationals.

In the Far East, where the Chinese community was especially numerous, the repressions were intensified by additional directives of the NKVD of the USSR of December 1937. It was assumed that the anti-Chinese campaign in the region would become a separate line within the framework of “national” operations. For this, the opportunity to consider the cases of the “Easterners” was provided to regional troikas, without sending them to Moscow.²⁹ In addition, decisions against Chinese citizens continued to be made in the usual judicial order. In February 1938, the powers to pass sentences were transferred to the Commission of the NKVD and the Prosecutor of the USSR; punitive measures against the Far Eastern Chinese population were included in the framework of order No. 00593.³⁰

As noted above, in January 1938, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks extended this policy until 15 April 1938, including the Chinese among the ethnic groups that fell under repression³¹; the “Harbin” operation continued as well. The order of the NKVD of the USSR dated 1 February 1938 gave the green light to new punitive lines, including the Chinese one, but left the algorithm of condemnation known as “album” the same. Its essence boiled down to the fact that repressive decisions were made solely on the basis of personal certificates submitted by the NKVD departments of the regions to Moscow and completed in special albums divided by individual “national” operations or lines. In addition to approving a series of “national” operations, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks and the NKVD of the USSR recommended intensifying repression against defectors.³² From that moment on, everyone who went through the special council at the NKVD received 10 years in the camps, and those who went through the military tribunals were to be executed by shooting. In addition, in January 1938, the NKVD initiated another “national” operation, the so-called mixed one, which included several lines, including the “Easterners” who were accused of spying for Japan. In fact, this meant that from January to mid-September 1938, the Chinese were subject to the “Harbin” and “mixed” actions. The Chinese population of the Far East also fell within

²⁷ *Massovye repressii v SSSR*, 284–285.

²⁸ *Lubinka. Stalin i glavnoe upravlenie*, 468–469.

²⁹ A.N. Yakovlev, ed. *Stalinskie deportatsii. 1928–1953* [Stalinist deportations. 1928–1953] (Moscow: Mezhdunar. fond ‘Demokratiya’: Materik Publ., 2005), 101–104.

³⁰ N.A. Potapova, “Antikitaiskaia aktsiia,” 157–158.

³¹ *Lubinka. Stalin i glavnoe upravlenie*, 468–469.

³² *Ibid.*, 469.

the scope of Order No. 00593 of 20 September 1937 which authorized a new wave of persecution of defectors.

By the beginning of September 1938, the Commissions of the NKVD and the Prosecutor of the USSR had considered about 18 thousand cases. At the same time, about 2 thousand people were subject to a “mixed” punitive action,³³ the rest – to the “Harbin” one.³⁴ Only in mid-September 1938, the central authorities transferred some of the powers to the regions, and the “Chinese” operation began, which, however, did not become large-scale. Of the 2,248 Chinese convicted in September – November 1938, only 240 were subject to this direction, whereas to the “Harbin” operation – 1,974 people.³⁵

With regard to the total number of the repressed Chinese population of the USSR in the period under review, it is not yet possible to provide accurate data, since the materials of other extrajudicial instances have not yet been processed in full.

Deportations of the Chinese population

When analyzing the repressions of 1937–38 against the Chinese population, deportations should be taken into account as well. For example, when studying the Korean deportation campaign of 1937, the emphasis was placed on its total character, when all 172 thousand Soviet Koreans were expelled; however, this repressive action was not only total, but also combined, since representatives of other ethnic groups also were subject to it; in particular, some of the Chinese got to Kazakhstan in the second half of 1937. In 1937 the large-scale expulsion of the Chinese was not carried out for two reasons: for the most part they were not Soviet citizens and did not live in compact enclaves. As an alternative to deportation to remote areas, it was envisaged to leave the country under the NKVD control, but it is not known whether it was implemented.

The deportation of the Chinese was sanctioned the following year, 1938. The decision to carry it out was made by the Politburo on 5 March 1938, and the corresponding NKVD directive No. 11161 on organizing the deportation was issued only on 16 May 1938. The expulsion of the Chinese from the city of Vladivostok and the border area can be described as deportation “to cleanse the borders.” Illegal immigrants were expelled, these included persons with expired Chinese citizenship or those who had declared the Chinese citizenship, but had not confirmed it. A phased expulsion of these people was envisaged: first to Kazakhstan, and then outside the country, to the Chinese province of Xinjiang. The number of those arrested and subject to expulsion was supposed to be about 7–8 thousand people, but after the expulsion of 1,361 people the operation was abruptly cancelled. On 10 June 1938, the Politburo ordered to end the arrests of the Chinese, as well as the expulsion of those who were imprisoned, if no sentences were passed against them. Perhaps it was in connection with this decision that in the summer of 1938 the “Chinese” albums already sent by the NKVD Directorate for the Far Eastern Territory to the NKVD Commission and the USSR Prosecutor's Office for consideration were annulled. By the beginning of September, the special council at the NKVD had considered only the remaining “Chinese” albums. During the meetings on 2 and 5 September 1938, the commission of the NKVD and the USSR Prosecutor decided to deport 364 Chinese citizens from the country³⁶; it was ordered to release 2,853 Chinese people from prisons,³⁷ and 6,189 Chinese

³³ Arkhiv Upravleniia Federal'noi slozhby bezopasnosti po Omskoi oblasti [Archive of the Office of the Federal Security Service for the Omsk Region], f. 6, poriadok 10516–10527.

³⁴ Ibid., poriadok 9828–9874.

³⁵ Ibid., f. 8-oc, op. 1, poriadok 70, l. 30.

³⁶ N.A. Potapova, “Antikitaiskaia aktsyia,” 160–161.

³⁷ V.G. Datsyshen, “Politicheskiye repressii i kitaytsy v SSSR,” *Penpolit*, Febraury 12, 2022, http://www.penpolit.ru/papers/detail2.php?ELEMENT_ID=947

with their families were to be sent to Xinjiang.³⁸ There is evidence that during the second wave, 3,173 people were deported to Xinjiang.³⁹ The expulsions continued in 1939.

In total, in accordance with the decisions of extrajudicial instances, during the years of the Great Terror, a little more than 9,2 thousand foreigners were expelled from the USSR. But the real scale of the expulsion was much greater, since in a number of cases the deportation from the country was carried out in accordance with special directives.⁴⁰ On the one hand, the deportations became independent repressive campaigns, either coinciding in time with the “national” operations, or carried out on the eve or after their completion; on the other hand, they became an integral part of them. It is this circumstance that creates added complexity in studying the deportations of foreigners in the period under review and in estimating the number of those deported from the country. Not all foreigners deported from the country in 1937–38 should be considered as victims of the NKVD “national” operations.

The final stage of the repressions coincided with the adoption in August 1938 of a new law “On the USSR Citizenship” which introduced the category of “person without citizenship,” that is, a stateless person. Local councils and the highest bodies of autonomies finally lost the right to grant Soviet citizenship; the simplified procedure for its acquisition was also cancelled. From then on, the status of a former citizen of a foreign state or a stateless person served as a reason for restriction of rights and even repression, although the Constitution guaranteed them all civil rights, with the exception of political ones. The Decree of the Council of People's Commissars of 29 June 1939 introduced new rules for the residence of foreigners and stateless persons in the USSR; the restrictions contained in them once again spurred naturalization.

Another big issue concerns the extent to which the Soviet censuses of 1937 and 1939 reflect the real scale of the repression against the Chinese during the period of the Great Terror (one should remind that the 1937 census was recognized by the authorities as faulty due to political considerations, because the country's population was lower than expected). According to the 1937 census, the total number of Chinese people in the USSR was almost 38,5 thousand, including 20 thousand Chinese citizens. Almost all of them lived on the territory of the RSFSR,⁴¹ including the bulk of Chinese citizens, and this was almost 19 thousand people, mainly in the Far East.⁴² As for the 1939 census data, there were already 32 thousand Chinese people living in the USSR, including about 25,5 thousand in Russia and 5,1 thousand in Kazakhstan.⁴³ In the Far East the number of Chinese

³⁸ E.N. Chernoluskaya, *Prinuditel'nye migratsii*, 262.

³⁹ E.N. Chernoluskaya, “Deportatsiya kitaitsev iz Primoriia (1938 g.) [Deportation of Chinese from Primorye (1938)],” in *Istoricheskii opyt otkrytiia, zaseleniia i osvoeniia Priamur'ia i Primor'ia v XVII–XX vv. (k 350-letiiu nachala pokhoda V.D. Poiarkova na Amur): teziy dokladov i soobshchenii Mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii*, issue 2 (Vladivostok: Institut istorii, arkhologii i etnografii narodov Dal'nego Vostoka Dal'nevostochnogo otdeleniya RAN Publ., 1993), 78–81.

⁴⁰ N.N. Ablazhei, “Deportatsii iz SSSR perioda Bol'shogo Terrora [Deportation from the USSR during the Great Terror],” *Istoricheskii kur'er*, no. 1 (2019): <http://istkurier.ru/data/2019/ISTKURIER-2019-1-08.pdf>

⁴¹ “Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia SSSR po respublikam, kraiam, oblastiam po materialam Vsesoiuznoy perepisi naseleniia 1937 g. [The national composition of the population of the USSR by republics, territories, regions based on the materials of the All-Union Population Census of 1937],” *Elektronnaya biblioteka istoricheskikh dokumentov* [Electronic Library of Historical Documents], March 1, 2022, <http://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/47599#mode/inspect/page/3/zoom/4>

⁴² V.P. Motrevich, “Inostrannye grazhdane – kitaitsy v Sovetskom Soyuze po dannym Vsesoyuznoii perepisi naseleniia SSSR 1937 g. [Foreign nationals – Chinese in the Soviet Union according to All-Union Census of the USSR in 1937],” in *Kitai: istoriia i sovremennost': materialy VIII mezhdunarod. nauch.-prakt. konf. Ekaterinburg, 7–8 okt. 2014 g.* (Yekaterinburg: Izd-vo Ural. un-ta Publ., 2015), 178–181.

⁴³ See: “Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1939 goda. Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia po respublikam SSSR [All-Union census of the population of 1939. National composition of the population by republics of the USSR],” *Demoskop Weekly*, no. 963-964 (2022): http://www.demoskop.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_39.php

people decreased considerably. During the intercensal period, only Kazakhstan had the positive dynamics. Since the census also took into account the persons who were imprisoned, we will also give these figures: in 1939 the number of Chinese prisoners in the Gulag was 3,161 people, in 1940 – 4,033 people, in 1941 – 3,025 people.⁴⁴ Thus, the difference in the number of Chinese people according to the 1937 and 1939 censuses is 6,5 thousand people, which certainly indicates a reduction in the Chinese diaspora in the country, but it does not reflect the real scale of the repression.

Conclusions

In 1929–38 in the USSR there were carried out several anti-Chinese campaigns, the peaks of which were during the Soviet–Chinese conflict of 1929, two waves of passportization in 1933 and 1936, and the repressions of the Great Terror of 1937–38.

The processing of the materials of extrajudicial instances in 1937–38 showed that this ethnic group was subjected to repression during the two “national” operations of the NKVD of the USSR, namely the “Harbin” and “mixed” ones. The escalation of repressions against the Chinese population occurred in 1938, but at the same time, a special “Chinese” line in repressions took shape only at the final stage of the Great Terror. At the moment, it may be affirmed that during the period of the Great Terror more than 18 thousand ethnic Chinese people became victims of the NKVD “national” operations which amounted to 5 % of the total number of those repressed on ethnic grounds. The final figures can be corrected during further processing of the materials of all extrajudicial instances.

The widely practiced forced resettlements of people of Chinese nationality to remote areas of the country and beyond its borders were independent campaigns, but they were also used as a form of punishment in the implementation of “national” operations. The dominant criterion for the expulsion of foreigners was not only the fact of their lack of citizenship, but also their nationality. The deportations made it possible to drastically reduce the number of the Chinese population in the Far East and Siberia. The authorities resorted to repressions in order to speed up the integration and naturalization of the Chinese population permanently residing in the USSR. The result of the ten-year policy of discrimination was the elimination of territorial enclaves and the reduction of the Chinese diaspora in the country.

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⁴⁴ V.N. Zemskov, “GULAG (istoriko-sociologicheskij aspekt) [GULAG (historical and sociological aspect)],” *Sociologicheskie issledovaniya*, no. 6 (1991): 13.

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