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Surveillance and Long Hours: North Korean Workers in Russia

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CHAPTER III

Surveillance and Long Hours: North Korean Workers in Russia

Britt C.H. Blom and Rosa Brandse

Introduction

Currently, the DPRK is one of the leading suppliers of foreign workers to Russia, a country dealing with pressing labour shortages. In contrast to Russia's support of the UN resolution forcing all member states to repatriate DPRK workers to their home country, the prospects of losing North Korean migrant workers seemed to misalign with local interests in the country. Andrei Tarasenko, governor of the Primorski Krai province which borders the DPRK, even petitioned in Moscow to make exceptions for the nearly ten thousand North Korean workers living in his area, but it was to no avail. However, Moscow did publicly announce that it would not rush the repatriations and declared that the DPRK migrants would have till the end of 2019 to leave Russia voluntarily, while leaving the enforcement procedure undisclosed.¹ Moreover, Moscow also stated that the sanctions would be a serious blow to the Russian economy, especially in the far eastern regions,² highlighting the contrast between Russian interests and the UN resolution.

Russia's reluctance to let the workers leave is noteworthy, as it brings attention to a problem that often stays hidden within the Siberian Mountains; the North Korean migrants and their working conditions. North Korean labour is cheap and efficient. This is, as shown in the previous chapter on the Polish case and the next chapter on the Czech case,

1) Anthony V. Rinna, 'On a two year deadline, some provinces have sought to protect longstanding economic interests', *NKnews*, 16 February 2018, accessed 31 May 2018, <https://www.nknews.org/2018/02/what-will-happen-to-north-korean-laborers-in-russia/>.

2) 'Russia Forced to Deport North Korean Migrant Workers After UN Sanctions', *The Moscow Times*, 7 February 2018, accessed 31 May 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-forced-deport-north-korean-migrant-workers-after-un-sanctions-60414>.

a combination that is hard to resist for some employers, even if it comes at the expense of the workers' labour conditions. Nevertheless, as a member of the International Labour Organization, Russia ratified Convention No. 29, which condemns forced labour. When it comes to these migrants, however, evidence suggests the convention is not being upheld.

There has been some international journalistic interest on the subject as well. In late 2011, *CNN* published an online piece detailing the harsh working conditions DPRK labourers faced in Siberia, Russia, basing their conclusions on *Vice* video material released earlier that year.³ More recently, in November 2017, the *New York Times* also published an extensive article documenting the situation of North Korean workers in Russia, revealing its primary conclusion in its title: 'North Koreans in Russia Work "Basically in the Situation of Slaves"'.⁴ The article explores the fall in the value of the rouble and the consequent need for more foreign currency for the DPRK regime; a regime in desperate need of dollars.⁵ In a similar vein, the *Washington Post* published an article with the headline 'How North Korea takes a cut from its workers abroad', emphasising the financial dealings that impede North Korean workers from receiving the full extent of the salaries earned from their labour.⁶

These articles show the extent of journalistic interest on the subject. Despite media interest, however, an academic discussion of North Korean forced labour in Russia has remained mostly absent.⁷ This chapter will attempt to fill this gap by analysing the conditions of North Korean workers in Russia, and looking at the structural foundations of North Korean overseas forced labour by comparing the results of the analysis provided here to the Polish case explored in this volume, and in earlier work.⁸ First, a historical framework of the DPRK workers in Russia in the past decades will provide a background for the current situation. Second, the working conditions of North Korean migrants will be analysed through a case study of Blagoveshchensk and Vladivostok, two Russian cities that have traditionally employed many North Korean workers. Lastly, these findings will be discussed in relation to findings from previous research to highlight the patterned aspects of North Korean forced overseas labour.

This chapter will focus its principal analysis on information gleaned from raw video footage taken in Russia by a team of investigative journalists working on a documentary about North Korean forced labour: *Dollar Heroes*.⁹ The material included here is significant

3) Shane Smith, 'North Korean labor camps in Siberia', *CNN*, 15 December 2011, <https://edition.cnn.com/2011/12/15/world/asia/north-korean-labor-camps-in-siberia/index.html>.

4) Andrew Higgins, 'North Koreans in Russia Work "Basically in the Situation of Slaves"', *The New York Times*, 11 July 2017, accessed 22 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/11/world/europe/north-korea-russia-migrants.html>.

5) *Ibid.*

6) Jason Aldag, 'How North Korea takes a cut from its workers abroad', *The Washington Post*, 1 November 2017, accessed 31 May 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/how-north-korea-takes-a-cut-from-its-workers-abroad/2017/10/31/98728d28-b98d-11e7-9e58-e6288544af98_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.34c081d2c592.

7) The sole exception in English being Chan Hong Park, *Conditions of Labor and Human Rights: North Korean Overseas Laborers in Russia*, (Seoul: NKDB, 2016), which will be discussed later in this chapter.

8) Remco E. Breuker and Imke B.L.H. van Gardingen, eds., *Slaves to the System, North Korean Forced Labour in the European Union: The Polish Case* (Leiden: LeidenAsiaCentre Press, 2016).

9) The Why foundation, *Dollar Heroes*, documentary, directed by Sebastian Weis, Carl Gierstorfer, Jonghun Yu, Tristan Chytroschek and Wonjung Bae, produced by a&u buero filmproduktion (2018; Germany: ARTE).

as it was given to the research team in its raw, unedited form.¹⁰ The video material shows several North Koreans working in Russia, half of whom have defected while the other half is (for as far as we know) still living in Russia or North Korea. As most previous work on North Korean overseas labour has mostly been conducted through interviews with defectors, this chapter will enable a broader perspective on the working conditions DPRK workers face in Russia. The visual material was explored, after which the findings were placed in the context of the other source material and the Polish case. This will show that, despite the lack of generalisability with regard to all North Korean overseas labour practices, there are specific repetitive features congruent with other cases of North Korean labour export and exploitation that appear too frequently to be coincidental.

North Korean migrant workers in Russia

North Korean workers have been present in Russia for decades. According to a record of a meeting between Kim Il-sŏng and Stalin at the beginning of 1950, the DPRK asked the Soviet Union (SU) for permission to send a large group of workers to the districts of the Soviet Far East¹¹ and Siberia for practical work experience. This request was granted, and it was mentioned during the meeting that it was not the first batch of workers to migrate to the SU.¹² This is the start of what historian Larisa Zabrovskaya considers the first of three waves of North Korean workers in Russia.¹³ Although the original purpose was to educate the North Koreans, the SU needed the additional foreign labour for their fishing industry, making the deal lucrative for both sides.¹⁴ By the end of 1961, most of the 25,000 North Korean workers who travelled to their northern neighbour for employment and education had returned to their homeland again.¹⁵

The second wave started after Kim Il-sŏng met the new General Secretary of the Communist Party, Leonid Brezhnev, in 1966. Together they signed an agreement to allow more North Korean workers to assist in the timber industry.¹⁶ North Korean-Soviet relations started to deteriorate during this period due to the DPRK's refusal to pick a side in the split between the SU and China.¹⁷ In contrast, the relationship between the two bordering local provinces of North Hamgyŏng in North Korea and Primorski Krai in the SU actually

10) Although some of the conclusions of this chapter and those of the documentary *Dollar Heroes* align, there was no cooperation between the authors of this chapter and the team of investigative journalists beyond handing over the material.

11) Now called the 'Federal District of the Russian Far East'.

12) Wilson Centre Digital Archive (for 'Record of a Conversation of Cde. Stalin with Kim Il Sung and Pak Heon-yeong'; 114905; translated by Gary Goldberg; accessed 31 May 2018), <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114905>.

13) Larisa Zabrovskaya, 'The Korean Peninsula and the Security of Russia's Primorski Krai (Maritime Province)', in *The North Korean Nuclear Program: Security, Strategy, and New Perspectives from Russia*, eds. James Clay Moltz and Alexandre Y. Mansourov (New York: Routledge, 2011), 179.

14) *Ibid.*, 181.

15) *Ibid.*

16) *Ibid.*

17) Alexander Lukin, 'Russian Strategic Thinking Regarding North Korea,' in *International Relations and Asia's Northern Tier: Sino-Russia Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia*, Gilbert Rozman, and Sergey Darchenko, eds. (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017), 268.

improved for an extended period of time. Local leaders often met and exchanged visits of workers' delegations.¹⁸ These warm relations continued until the Soviet Union fell, leading to mutual distrust among the former political allies.¹⁹

Relations even became hostile in the 1990s, after the Russian authorities caught several North Korean lumberjacks smuggling heroin on Russian trains.²⁰ The DPRK government was not pleased with their former communist ally as well, as Russia had recently started economic and diplomatic relations with North Korea's enemy South Korea.²¹ Adding to the spiralling hostility between the two countries was the socio-political tension that was arising in the Primorski Kray province between North and South Koreans vying over influence among the ethnic Korean population that was still living in Russia since before the Korean separation. This conflict led to increasing unrest and the eventual murder of a South Korean official. It was never proven that the assassination was orchestrated by North Korea. Nevertheless, it led to a growing distrust of DPRK workers among the local Russian leaders.²²

It would, however, not take long before Moscow realised economic ties with North Korea would be in its own best interest, rekindling the friendly relationship and starting the third wave of North Korean migrant workers to Russia. There were some differences to the previous arrangements, most of which were political in nature. As South Korea is a far more significant trade partner for Russia, Moscow was determined to take all the political support of North Korea out of the agreement and decided to focus instead on trade and peace on the peninsula. North Korea was not too keen on this turn of events, stalling the negotiations on a trade deal. Eventually the two countries signed a friendship treaty in 2000, and a more economic focused declaration of trust in 2001.²³

Although the focus of Russo-DPRK economic relations is on energy and infrastructure, the most lucrative aspects of the bilateral trade turned out to be North Korean labour.²⁴ Even trade between North and South Korea provides a turnover 15 times larger than that between the DPRK and Russia.²⁵ Labour, on the other hand, provides mutual benefits. As a consequence of international sanctions, North Korea is in need of the foreign currency overseas labour generates. Middle Eastern and South East Asian countries are reportedly refraining from taking on North Korean workers under pressure from the United States, and China is turning North Korean workers away after relations between the neighbouring

18) Zabrovskaya, 'The Korean Peninsula and the Security of Russia's Primorski Kray', 182.

19) Alexander Zhebin, 'Russia and North Korea: An Emerging, Uneasy Partnership', *Asian Survey* 35, no. 8 (1995), 732.

20) Seung-Ho Joo, 'The New Friendship Treaty between Moscow and Pyongyang', *Comparative Strategy* 20, no. 5 (2001), 479.

21) Liudmila Zakharova, 'Economic Cooperation between Russia and North Korea: New Goals and New Approaches', *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7 (2016): 152.

22) Zabrovskaya, 'The Korean Peninsula and the Security of Russia's Primorski Kray', 192.

23) Seung-Ho Joo, 'The New Friendship Treaty between Moscow and Pyongyang', 467.

24) Zakharova, 'Economic Cooperation between Russia and North Korea', 156.

25) Ibid.

countries are at an all-time low.²⁶ However, Russia needs help with their labour shortages in Siberia and the Far East.

Companies in the country have been employing thousands of migrants, many of which are from Central Asia and often work there illegally.²⁷ As xenophobia in Russia has risen over the years, these migrants face extreme discrimination from both the public and officials and their presence has become a politically sensitive issue.²⁸ Russian media even quoted regional development experts who expressed their preference for North Korean workers as 'they are not Muslim and pose no terrorist threat'.²⁹ North Korean migrants are also considered disciplined, law-abiding and inexpensive by their Russian employers, making them ideal workers.³⁰

Statistics from Russia show the official number of North Korean workers up to 2016. This number does not include North Korean refugees living and working in Russia without an official permit.³¹ The Russian Ministry of Labour reported that 47,364 North Koreans were living in Russia on a working visa in 2015. This makes the DPRK one of the top three countries with the most workers in Russia, along with China (first place) and Turkey (second place).³² It is also third when it comes to new working visa provided by the Russian consular offices. As many as 12,466 were issued in 2015.³³

Contradicting these numbers, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs claims that there are only 30,400 DPRK citizens working in Russia on a working permit, a number that declined to 29,100 in 2016. In 2017 media reports estimated the total number of North Korean workers in Russia at around 40,000.³⁴ In these statistics, North Korea is second

26) Artyom Lukin and Liudmila Zakharova, 'Russia-North Korea economic ties: Is There More Than Meets the Eye?' (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2017), 251.

27) Elena Tyuryukanova, *Forced labour in the Russian federation today: irregular migration and trafficking in human beings* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2006), 5.

28) John Round and Irina Kuznetsova, 'Necropolitics and the Migrant as a Political Subject of Disgust: The Precarious Everyday of Russia's Labour Migrants', *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 7-8 (2016), 1019.

29) 'Дальний Восток оставят без строителей: как санкции в отношении КНДР скажутся на регионе', *Prima-media*, 10 August 2017, accessed 31 May 2018, <https://primamedia.ru/news/612921/>.

30) Zakharova, 'Economic Cooperation between Russia and North Korea', 159.

31) Russia does not provide political asylum to North Koreans and only gives working permits through the DPRK government, making it impossible for a North Korean defector to legally work in Russia before he or she has obtained a different nationality.

32) These numbers exclude many Central Asian countries as Russia has special visa agreements with them. For the working visa numbers, see Anastasia Napalkova and Stepan Opalev (Анастасия Напалкова и Степан Опалев), 'И швея, и сварщик, и артист: Кем работают иностранцы в России', *RBC*, 22 April 2015, accessed 31 May 2018, <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2015/04/22/56bce8729a7947299f72c0b7>.

33) Consular Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Консульский департамент МИД России), *Статистические данные по визам, выданным российскими дипломатическими представительствами и консульскими учреждениями в 2016 году*, http://www.kdmid.ru/content/cnslfunk_doc/визы/Visa_2016.pdf (accessed 31 May 2018); Consular Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Консульский департамент МИД России), *Статистические данные по визам, выданным российскими дипломатическими представительствами и консульскими учреждениями в 2015 году*, http://www.kdmid.ru/content/cnslfunk_doc/визы/Visa_2015.pdf (accessed 31 May 2018).

34) Elizabeth Shim, 'Russia, North Korea sign 'labor immigration' accord', *UPI*, 27 March 2017, accessed 31 May 2018, <https://www.upi.com/Russia-North-Korea-sign-labor-immigration-accord/4261490633465/>.

only to China in both years.³⁵ Although these numbers diverge, they show that the DPRK is currently one of the leading suppliers of foreign labour to the Russian Federation.

The legal position of North Korean migrant workers in Russia

The Russian Federation and the DPRK signed a labour agreement stipulating all rights and regulations for the workers living in each other's countries.³⁶ The agreement states that the workers are not allowed to work under less favourable conditions than those of the host country's workers and that the safety and health should be guaranteed by the host state. Medical costs resulting from hazardous work will be covered by the host state and in case of death, the host state will cover the transportation costs of the body. In determining the legal responsibility with regard to forced labour, the most important section of this agreement to consider is clause 13. This clause states that the workers are guaranteed the rights; freedoms; safety; and legal protection given by the legislation of the host state to all foreigners.³⁷ This means that North Korean workers ought to be protected by the international treaties signed by Russia and the domestic labour code.³⁸

Foreign workers in Russia are all protected by the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention No. 29. This convention condemns forced labour by requiring all member states to adopt domestic laws criminalising the practice. It should be noted that this is the only relevant ILO convention Russia has signed. The addition to Convention No. 29 that was made in 2014 stating that countries should emphasise education on the subject of forced labour and provide better inspection services, was not ratified by the Russian Federation. Neither were the conventions on improved rights for migrant workers (no. 97 and 143).³⁹ Still, as required by the forced labour convention, Russian domestic law does provide some legal protection. The first is the Russian constitution, which states that:

1. *Labour is free. Everyone shall have the right to freely use his labour capabilities, to choose the type of activity and profession.*
2. *Forced labour shall be banned.*

35) Federal State Statistics Service (Федеральная служба государственной статистики), *Российский статистический ежегодник 2017*, § 5.16. Численность иностранных граждан, имевших действующее разрешение на работу, http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b17_13/IssWWW.exe/Stg/05-16.doc (accessed 31 May 2018).

36) Legal Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry (правовой департамент МИД России), 'Соглашение между правительством Российской Федерации и правительством Коре́йской народно-демократической республики о временной трудовой деятельности граждан одного государства на территории другого государства', 31 August 2007, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/2_contract/-/storage-viewer/bilateral/page-133/45690 (accessed 31 May 2018).

37) *Ibid.*, clause 13.

38) The agreement does end with a clause stating that all disputes concerning the implementation and application of the agreement will be dealt with through consultation between the Russian federal migration service and ministry of health together with the North Korean ministry of foreign trade, making the legal application of the document complicated for other parties.

39) 'Ratifications for Russian Federation', ILO, accessed 31 May 2018, http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11200:0::NO:11200:P11200_COUNTRY_ID:102884.

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3. *Everyone shall have the right to labour conditions meeting the safety and hygienic requirements, for labour remuneration without any discrimination whatsoever and not lower than minimum wages and salaries established by the federal law, as well as the right to protection against unemployment.*
4. *Recognition shall be given to the right to individual and collective labour disputes with the use of methods of their adjustment fixed by the federal law, including the right to strike.*
5. *Everyone shall have the right to rest and license. Those working by labour contracts shall be guaranteed the fixed duration of the working time, days off and holidays, and the annual paid leave established by the federal law.⁴⁰*

Hypothetically, this gives every worker in Russia the right to free labour under safe conditions. The Russian labour code, which went into effect in 2001, goes further by describing, for instance, minimum wage and the fixed working time (40 hours a week, or 36 when working in dangerous conditions). It also allows all workers to refuse their work if it is in violation of their contract or if it puts their health in danger. These and other disputes can be solved through trade unions, individual court cases, or collective actions.⁴¹

However, the reality many workers face shows the ease with which these legal protections can be circumvented. The Russian labour code only considers a labour dispute valid if the problem arises between an employer and an employee directly, but if there is a third party involved, such as an employment agency, the law is no longer applicable.⁴² Companies that supply labour to other companies, therefore, provide a loophole in which the responsibility of the labour conditions falls on a party that cannot be held legally responsible. This loophole has often been used with migrant workers who were either exploited by Russian agencies, who did not provide the workers with contracts, or by agencies in the workers home country.⁴³ As will be described below, the latter situation is the only way North Korean workers are placed in Russia. However, after news concerning this method - called 'outstaffing' - became widespread, the Russian government amended the labour code, making the practice only legal in short-term cases (9 months) and only to those with official permission. Significantly, another clause was added stating that foreign organisations are allowed to use outstaffing, obviating possible restrictions to the practice.⁴⁴ Therefore, it is

40) Russian Const. Art. 37, <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-03.htm>.

41) Translation of the Russian Labour Code: https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/rus_e/wtACCrus58_LEg_363.pdf.

42) Ibid., Chapter 60.

43) Olga Bantsekina, 'Agency labor and secondment in Russia: present reality and perspectives', *Coleman Services*, 2011, accessed 31 May 2018, <https://www.coleman.ru/en/opinion/agency-labor-and-secondment-in-russia-present-re-al>.

44) Olga Antipkina, 'Regulation of Secondment (Outstaffing) in Russia', *De Berti Jacchia Franchini forlani Studio Legale*, 2016, accessed 31 May 2018, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/documents.lexology.com/098302c8-eedd-44ce-be11-c25ec98f1ef7.pdf>.

incredibly difficult for North Korean migrants to use Russian domestic laws to assert their rights in order to protect themselves from forced labour practices.

Working conditions of (North Korean) migrants in Russia

As stated above, Russian companies have been employing migrants for years, and with the rising political anti-migrant discourse, the working lives of the migrants has not been easy. Obtaining a visa in Russia is difficult, and as a result many migrants work illegally.⁴⁵ This has made them vulnerable to situations of forced labour; they work long and hard hours, with no paid leave and hardly any sick days.⁴⁶ Some Russian experts claim that the authorities are involved, as illegal migrants have been found working for officials, and corrupt police officers not infrequently receive kickbacks from the companies exploiting migrant workers.⁴⁷ North Korean migrants have also been reported to be working in slave-like conditions in Russia, but what is noticeably different in these situations is that the North Koreans work with valid working permits.⁴⁸ Although this difference exists, North Korean workers are still structurally placed into unsafe working environments. For example, on the working site of the upcoming World Cup Stadium in St Petersburg, North Korean labourers and other migrants worked together in dangerous conditions with live electricity and no safety harnesses leading to at least four deaths, one of whom was North Korean.⁴⁹

As one of the few scholars looking at the working conditions and dispatch methods of North Korean overseas labour in Russia, South Korean legal scholar Park Chan Hong interviewed 50 North Korean refugees who used to work in the Russian federation.⁵⁰ He catalogued their testimonies to give the first broad-scale overview of the working conditions of DPRK labourers in Russia. As is the case with the research in this chapter, Park's work cannot be generalised to describe the situation of all North Korean workers in Russia. It does however show the reoccurring aspects of North Korean overseas forced labour, as it highlights the conditions all interviewees were in despite their different dispatch time and location.⁵¹ For instance, all interviewed workers were employed by a North Korean company in Russia who sent them to Russian worksites. Although most workers applied voluntarily to be sent abroad, some were chosen by the company they worked for in North Korea. In

45) Tyuryukanova, *Forced labour in the Russian federation*, 60.

46) Ibid.

47) Ibid., 64.

48) Migrants from central Asian countries can get residency permits with permission to work but still do not work legally if they do not get an individual contract from their employer. North Koreans, however, 'sign' a contract with the North Korean company they work for which in turn deals with the Russian workplace, ensuring that, from a Russian perspective, the North Koreans work legally. The fact that they might not have signed those contracts themselves is a different issue.

49) Håvard Melnæs, 'The Slaves of St Petersburg', *Josimar*, 2017, accessed 31 May 2018, <http://www.josimar.no/artikler/the-slaves-of-st-petersburg/3851/>.

50) Chan Hong Park, *Conditions of Labor and Human Rights: North Korean Overseas Laborers in Russia* (Seoul: NKDB, 2016).

51) Park's research is particularly interesting because, as a researcher at the Seoul based Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, Park was able to cross-reference all testimonies, and use only those he deemed credible. It should be stated, however, that Park fails to provide an explanation of his methodological approach in detail with regard to the conditions in which the interviews were carried out.

addition, all of the workers interviewed by Park went to Russia to improve their individual financial situation and that of their families.⁵²

Not every North Korean citizen is eligible to work overseas. Selection requirements range from happy marriage, party membership, no criminals in the family, to having a reputation of being a hard worker. Besides this, there are physical requirements as well. Applicants have to be under the age of 45, at least 160 cm tall, and have no known illnesses.⁵³ It has to be stated that most interviewees mentioned that it is also possible to bribe the officials and be sent regardless of the requirements.⁵⁴ None of the interviewees saw or signed a contract, and most reported that their passports were taken, although this practice seems to have become less prevalent. The living facilities they were assigned to often lacked basic necessities, such as electricity or running water.⁵⁵ They worked 12 to 20 hours a day in exchange for minimum wage, and 30 per cent of their monthly wages were given to the North Korean government, after which living and food expenses were also deducted from their income. Workers who wanted to send money home had to take a job on the side, which was neither allowed by the North Korean government nor legal by Russian standards as they did not sign contracts for these jobs.⁵⁶ Many fell ill or died, the cost of which should have been paid for by Russia. However, all workers reported that they still paid their own medical costs and that DPRK officials took the Russian money.⁵⁷

According to Park's research, there was a rise in the number of North Korean labourers who defected from their Russian workplace around 1996 or 1997. His findings were based on defector testimonies. This development took place during a period of extreme famine in the DPRK, caused by severe economic problems and the collapse of the domestic food distribution system.⁵⁸ Workers who were abroad at this time started leaving their assigned workplaces in order to earn money elsewhere. Initially, this development did not seem to be a problem for the authorities in charge and they did not take action. This position has shifted in contemporary times.

A crackdown by North Korean officials took place after several companies started suffering from a large number of North Korean labourers leaving their regular work. Around 1997, the North Korean authorities and the Russian police started cooperating, and North Korean defectors started getting arrested. Any money they had earned on the side was confiscated, and the Russian authorities started sending the captured workers back to North Korea.⁵⁹ The number of escapees also decreased in the mid-2000s as a consequence of North Korea establishing inspection teams tasked with controlling the activities of the migrant workers after workhours.⁶⁰ This seems to have created a stricter surveillance system of all North Korean workers in Russia. The workers do, however, report less ideological

52) Ibid., 100.

53) Ibid., 102.

54) Ibid., 104.

55) Ibid., 144.

56) Ibid., 188.

57) Ibid., 184.

58) Ibid., 232.

59) Ibid.

60) Ibid., 233.

surveillance as the working hours are simply too demanding to still actively participate in political activities.⁶¹

In the United States Department of State *2017 Human Trafficking in Persons Report*, these allegations are repeated, and the North Korean leaders, as well as the Russian government, are requested to improve these conditions.

Russia so far has denied all accusations of this happening within their borders. The Russian ambassador to North Korea, Alexander Mantsegora, has called the US 2017 report on the 'slave-like conditions' of the North Korean workers 'utter nonsense'. He elaborated on this claim by stating that the workers make just as much as the average Russian worker and that even if the government commission of 40-50 per cent is deducted, it still 'feeds 13 family members back in North Korea'.⁶² Vassily Nebenzia, Russia's UN representative, also disputed the allegations, claiming that the North Koreans work in Russia on the basis of an intergovernmental agreement that ensures the worker's fundamental labour rights.⁶³

Case-study: the Footage of Blagoveshchensk and Vladivostok

The findings presented in this chapter rely on an exploration of visual material recorded in two locations in Russia; Blagoveshchensk, a developing city near the Sino-Russian border, and Vladivostok, a harbour city located close to North Korea and Japan.

Using a visual analysis approach, the researchers explore raw video material received from the team of investigative journalists involved in the making of the *Dollar Heroes* documentary.⁶⁴ The video material (raw footage) was recorded in 2017. The languages of the audio were mainly Korean, Russian, and English. Preliminary translations of the recorded material accompanied the data. The researchers updated and modified translations where this was deemed necessary for the clarity of the analysis. In total, the analysis includes 270 minutes (or 4 hours and 30 minutes) of raw video footage taken in Blagoveshchensk. In addition to this footage, the analysis includes 1431 minutes (or 23 hours and 51 minutes) of raw video footage taken in Vladivostok.

Regretfully, a large section of the footage recorded in Vladivostok was unintelligible due to static noise. These sections were not included in the analysis of the audio material, but were left intact for the video material analysis, and have been included in this chapter. The footage of Blagoveshchensk consisted primarily of interviews with North Korean workers and one defector. The footage taken in Vladivostok was mostly of North Korean buildings and included sightings of North Korean labourers working on construction sites. The film was shot by a team of (undercover) investigative journalists. The research team received

61) Ibid., 145.

62) 'Из России начали высылать северокорейских рабочих', *RIA*, 7 February 2018, accessed 31 May 2018, <https://ria.ru/society/20180207/1514118572.html>.

63) Joel Gehrke, 'Russia rejects Rex Tillerson's charge that it uses North Korean slave laborers', *Washington Examiner*, 15 December 2017, accessed 31 May 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/russia-rejects-rex-tillersons-charge-that-it-uses-north-korean-slave-laborers>.

64) This material was presented to us by the makers of the documentary, The Why Foundation. To our knowledge, they have not given the footage to any other party.

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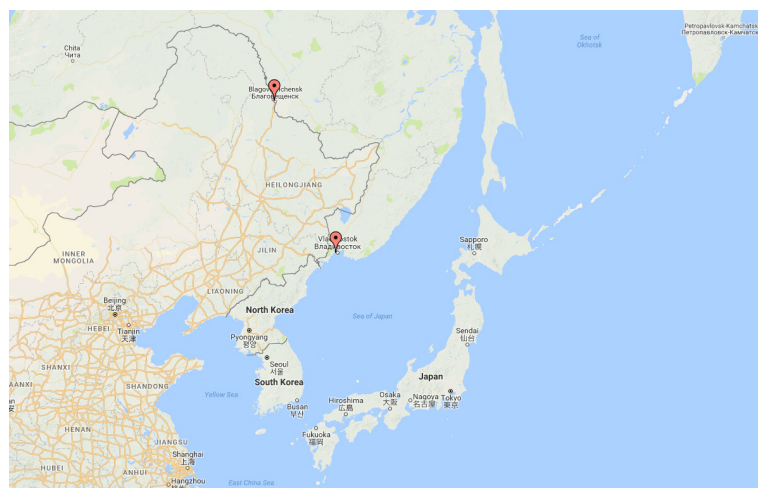


Image 1: Locations Blagoveshchensk and Vladivostok.

the footage in its original, unedited format. The data was stored on an offline drive and was processed using a separate device used solely for the purpose of analysis.

The material was coded on the basis of relevancy to the analytical categories constructed after initial sampling. Recurring themes were noted and placed in individual nodes. The researchers consequently joined similar nodes and constructed five analytical categories: decision-making, family, financial resources (money), surveillance, and the exportation of the North Korean ideological system abroad. Although there is a strong overlap between different nodes, for practical reasons the categories have been ordered by theme and are explored separately below.

All the workers interviewed are referred to as ‘witnesses’. All of the witnesses are men, and all of them are or have been construction workers during their tenure in overseas North Korean work sites in Russia. The following is a list of the witnesses covered in the analysis:

- Witness A is a former North Korean labourer who worked in Blagoveshchensk on construction sites. He defected around 2015.
- Witness B is a North Korean labourer working in Blagoveshchensk. During research in Blagoveshchensk, the *Dollar Heroes* team came across him while he was working.
- Witness C is a former North Korean labourer who defected. He worked in Vladivostok.
- Witness D is a North Korean labourer in Vladivostok currently working on construction sites.
- Witness E is a North Korea labourer in Vladivostok. It is not clear whether he has defected or not.
- Witness F is a North Korean labourer in Vladivostok who was working on the inside of an unfinished building when he was approached.

- Witness G is a former North Korean labourer who worked in Siberia (during the period of the Soviet Union) as a truck driver in a logging camp. He defected in 2005 to South Korea and brought his family with him. His family are no longer in North Korea and so, he feels, safe from harm. For this reason, he appears in the documentary uncensored.
- Witness H is a North Korean labourer in Vladivostok. He was hired by undercover journalists to renovate a building they rented.

For safety and consistency, the identities of the individuals have been anonymised. Their names are not given, and their locations have been generalised. Identifying characteristics such as age and surname have been purposefully left out of the analysis.

Going overseas: the decision-making process

There are several factors that influence the decision-making process of North Korean workers. The decision is not necessarily passive, and the incentives to work abroad are attractive, especially if those being sent are unaware of the reality of the situation. The decision-making process is complex and cannot be generalised without risking a certain degree of semantic abbreviation. Nevertheless, the following two witnesses offer a glimpse of the main motivators for applying for work abroad, and for transferring from one location to another when working conditions become so severe that workers run a high risk of losing their lives.

Witness A, abbreviated as 'A' in the following section, falls into the category of those wanting to leave North Korea in a bid to improve their situation. Emphasising that he believes survival is unlikely in his home country, 'A' states in his testimony that he left North Korea voluntarily. He explains that the dysfunctional food distribution system in North Korea was a motivating factor in his desire to work abroad:

*I couldn't survive in North Korea. During my vacation, my last time in North Korea, they gave each person seven kilograms of potatoes for a month to survive on. Seven kilograms of potatoes! I eat one meal a day, and the food is all gone!*⁶⁵

In order to facilitate his working abroad, 'A' asserts that he had to pay around 250 USD to be able to go and work in Russia.⁶⁶

Witness G (hereafter, 'G') stated that he wanted to work abroad because his family was impoverished. His application to work in Russia was motivated by a need to do something about his and his family's situation. After arriving in Russia and working there for a period, 'G' became disillusioned. His living facilities were seriously inadequate, and 'G' claims that the place where he slept was so cold that he cried because of his intense longing for a heater. His working conditions were no better, according to his report, and he stated that he had seen many people die at his workplace.⁶⁷

65) The Why Foundation, *Blagoveshchensk video 2*, 01:41:17:22 – 01:41:42:04.

66) *Ibid.*, 01:41:49:10 – 01:42:42:06.

67) The Why Foundation, *Dollar Heroes*, 3:25 – 5:18.

The family as leverage

In our case study, the importance of family bonds is illustrated by Witness H ('H'), who stated that: 'If I didn't have a family, I would not return'. Working conditions, however harsh, are frequently better than those back home. Similarly, the pay in foreign countries is higher, and the promise of foreign currency is alluring. 'H' adds that his current conditions in Russia are of a qualitatively higher standard than those in North Korea.⁶⁸

Like 'H', witness 'A' repeatedly expressed his concern for his family during his testimony. His family still resides in North Korea. By contrast, 'A' has made the decision to leave his workplace in Russia and has chosen to defect. According to him, the only reason his family remains alive is that he is considered a missing person: 'But if they learn I'm living like this in Russia, my whole family would probably be killed'.⁶⁹ He hopes he can reunite with them one day in South Korea.

'A' is aware of the magnitude of his decision and also of its possible consequences for other workers. The reason, according to 'A', that so few of his fellow workers, sent to forestry and construction companies, have also defected is that they are 'simple country folk'. These 'folks' are mostly from South Pyongan Province and Hwanghae Province in North Korea.⁷⁰ The implication is that these workers are unlikely to make such a big decision or even imagine the possibility of defecting.⁷¹

Promises of money

The workers are sent abroad to earn money for the regime. Many workers are unaware of how much money they will be able to keep for themselves.

Upon his arrival in Russia, 'G' was initially optimistic about new opportunities. However, after a while, he discovered that the fruits of his work were being channelled elsewhere and that he was being exploited by the government. When he began working at his new workplace, he was not aware that there was such a thing as a minimum wage in Russia.⁷² 'G' calculates that he only received seven per cent of his total salary, the majority of which was sent back to the North Korean government. 'G' explains that this was a necessary arrangement, but that a few labourers asked their Russian employers if they could be paid directly. This did not go by unnoticed by the DPRK authorities, however, and the workers that requested direct payment were accused of treason and sent to labour camps back in North Korea.⁷³ According to witness 'A', the case presented by 'G' is not an isolated phenomenon.

'A' states that every labourer is mandated to earn, and is required to 'give' between 200,000 and 250,000 won (approximately 200 USD) to the North Korean government every week. Failure to do so is not tolerated, and if workers are unable to fulfil this task, they were usually sent back to North Korea. This is not a group effort, as each worker must earn 200

68) Ibid., 19:17 – 20:20.

69) The Why Foundation, *Blagoveshchensk video 2*, 00:35:26:06 – 00:35:41:08.

70) Ibid., 00:47:48:17 – 00:48:14:19.

71) Ibid., 00:48:25:11 – 00:48:39:10.

72) The Why Foundation, *Dollar Heroes*, 03:52 – 04:10.

73) Ibid., 04:13 – 14:20.

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USD per week individually and give it to the North Korean authorities.⁷⁴ Indeed, 'A' says that earning money was the hardest part of his job. Sometimes, he would have to work from 6 am in the morning until 4 am the following morning to earn the requisite amount.

I would have to work until 4 am. Because I had to pay my contribution to the company, and the rest I kept. I'd have to work a lot to make any money. If I didn't work a lot, I could not save after paying contribution.⁷⁵ [...] Working from 6 am to 4 am just to pay contributions to the North and earn money. Working to death like that is hard.⁷⁶

Of course, extreme sleep deprivation was an inevitable consequence. It should be noted that some North Korean workers did not receive any money at all. In cases when workers failed to earn the minimum 200 USD a week, they are either sent back to North Korea,⁷⁷ or, sometimes, they were directed to work on a specific building without pay. This specific building was known as *Novaya*. However, work on *Novaya* was not limited to workers who were unable to meet their weekly quota; those workers who earned the minimum amount but achieved this by working outside 'regular' hours were also sent to work on this building, usually in the weekend, and also without getting paid.⁷⁸ 'A' reports that he was also required to work in this building for five hours each Saturday and each Sunday without getting paid.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, 'A' was able to take vacations and return to see his family in North Korea. To do so, however, 'A' had to hand over, in advance, the total contributions due for the months he would be on leave, as these vacations were classified as unpaid leave. In other



Image 2: Novaya taken from the raw footage in Blagoveshchensk.

74) The Why Foundation, *Blagoveshchensk video 2*, 00:29:32:13 – 00:29:48:07.

75) *Ibid.*, 00:17:24:24 – 00:17:38:14.

76) *Ibid.*, 00:54:37:23 – 00:54:48:05.

77) *Ibid.*, 00:30:09:18 – 00:30:15:02.

78) *Ibid.*, 00:56:12:20 – 00:58:01:12.

79) *Ibid.*, 00:58:06:14 – 00:58:17:14.

words, workers like 'A' were able to take leave and visit North Korea but were not paid to do so. In fact, workers have to earn enough money and accumulate enough funds to meet the quotas of the working days they are missing to be able to pay for their absence.⁸⁰

Witness C (hereafter, 'C') stated that the money earned in Russia is kept by North Korean officers and that the workers only received food coupons for the fulfilment of their most basic needs.⁸¹ Witness D ('D') adds that some workers only earn 50 USD per month, some 100 USD per month, but that there are also workers who do not earn anything. A significant number of these workers return to North Korea in debt. The little they do earn goes directly to the regime, and if these workers cannot fulfil the minimum quota, they are routinely sent back to North Korea. The minimum quota is not a fixed amount and rises annually.⁸²

According to 'D', ten years ago workers that were sent to Russia were obliged to send 15,000 roubles a month back to North Korea (the equivalent to approximately 265 USD).⁸³ This quota has doubled over the past decade, and now 'D' has to send 30,000 roubles (approximately 530 USD)⁸⁴ back every month. 'D' predicts that the minimum quota will likely rise to 50,000 rouble (approximately 883 USD)⁸⁵ within the year. If this happens, workers will have to earn more than 70,000 roubles a month (approximately 1236 USD)⁸⁶ to have any hope of saving and sending some money back to their families back home, but making this amount of money is nearly impossible. According to 'D', it is almost twice as much as the average Russian worker earns per month.⁸⁷

Witness 'H' as well has stated that he has to earn at least 100,000 roubles (approximately 1,767 USD)⁸⁸ per month if he wants to allow himself some financial leeway and to be able to send some money back to his family in North Korea.⁸⁹ This is double the minimum that other North Korean workers posted to different locations in Russia have to earn. How these labourers earn additional money for personal purposes differs from their regular work. Witness E ('E') states that in the evening after they finish their 'regular' work, some workers would work on other construction sites for Russian employers. They did so to earn extra money for themselves. They would work there the whole night. According to 'E', this is considered personal income.⁹⁰

'A' states that North Korean labourers usually wake up at 6 am, start working at 7 am and end their regular shifts at 9 or 10 pm.

These regular shifts are, on average, 14 to 16 hours per day. When workers are unable to finish the task at hand, however, they are forced to work until midnight or even 1 am.

80) The Why Foundation, *Blagoveshchensk video 2*, 00:30:23:01 – 00:30:53:15.

81) The Why Foundation, *Dollar Heroes*, 15:45 – 16:55.

82) *Ibid.*, 7:07 – 18:09.

83) Approximately 213 EUR. 'XE Currency Converter', XE, accessed 3 February 2018, <http://www.xe.com/currency-converter/convert/>.

84) Approximately 425 EUR. *Ibid.*

85) Approximately 709 EUR. *Ibid.*

86) Approximately 992 EUR. *Ibid.*

87) The Why Foundation, *Dollar Heroes*, 7:07 – 18:09.

88) Approximately 1418 EUR. *Ibid.*

89) The Why Foundation, *Dollar Heroes*, 19:17 – 20:20.

90) *Ibid.*, 18:20 – 18:53.

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Image 3: North Korean labourers working on a roof
(taken from raw footage in Vladivostok).



Image 4: North Korean labourer (taken from raw footage in Vladivostok).

Sometimes, shifts continued throughout the night. As mentioned, in addition to their regular shifts, workers took on hours at other locations in order to earn money for themselves. 'A' exemplifies this by adding that he sometimes worked until 4 am so that he could make some extra income. He states that he had to work a lot to save enough money for himself.⁹¹

Surveillance of the workers

During a visit to Blagoveshchensk, the team of investigative journalists located and approached a 'Korean looking man' (Witness B, or 'B') working on a construction site. When questioned about his background, he confirmed that he was indeed a North Korean worker.⁹² When asked what he was doing there, 'B' told the team that he had come to Russia three years ago to carry out construction work. He explained that he had come to Russia believing that he could earn some money, but that was not the case.⁹³ After talking to the journalists for only a few minutes, 'B' received a phone call. During the call, 'B' was apparently asked whom he was talking to. 'B' replied that he would tell them to go away. After the call ended, the interviewer asked him if they could continue their conversation another time. 'B' replied that they were being watched from somewhere, implying that he was not able to do so.⁹⁴ It is apparent from this footage that there is some form of surveillance present that keeps tabs on the workers, around the clock.

The next morning, at 7 am, three people knocked on the investigative journalists' door. It was a policeman and two civil servants from the immigration office. The team were told that the property owner had not notified the authorities of the presence of foreigners, and they were taken away to be registered. Their passports were taken away, and their memory cards and USB sticks were also confiscated. Once the team had been registered, a procedure that was apparently 'routine', they were given their passports back.⁹⁵

Following this experience, the investigative team took a different approach in Vladivostok, where they went undercover, posing as property investors. The footage shows them walking into a building and approaching Witness F ('F') to ask him several questions. However, echoing the events in Blagoveshchensk, a North Korean foreman arrives and asks the team what they are doing.⁹⁶ Replying that they are potential buyers viewing the location, the North Korean foreman aggressively states that they are in the wrong location and that buyers are supposed to be elsewhere.

Exporting the North Korean ideological system abroad

The team of investigative journalists visited the living quarters, or barracks, for North Korean workers in Vladivostok. They deliberately arrived after the North Korean labourers had left

91) The Why Foundation, *Blagoveshchensk video 2*, 00:29:30:00 – 00:48:40:00.

92) The Why Foundation, *Blagoveshchensk video 3*, 02:54:54:00 – 02:55:23:07.

93) *Ibid.*, 03:00:00:10 – 03:00:13:06.

94) The authors of this chapter are aware that the footage of this conversation was shown in the documentary and that the images, in addition to the given context, might make witness 'B' identifiable. This analysis attempts to keep the identity of the subject as anonymous as possible, acknowledging differences in the methodological and ethical framework between the documentary and the analysis given in this chapter.

95) The Why Foundation, *Dollar Heroes*, 14:35 – 15:32.

96) *Ibid.*



Image 5: Inside the barrack (taken from raw footage in Vladivostok).



Image 6: Inside the barrack (taken from raw footage in Vladivostok).



Image 7: Inside the barrack (taken from raw footage in Vladivostok).

for work. The team discovered several points of interest, among them North Korean propaganda and North Korean newspapers. They encountered walls filled with slogans written in Han'gŭl,⁹⁷ such as 'Let's push for the victorious advance of socialism through the great power of our own strenuous efforts!' and 'Serving for the people!'

Not only were the living quarters designed to specifically emulate North Korean conditions, replete with news material and propaganda props, but a ritual was also used to duplicate the regulatory system and affirm behavioural conditioning. For example, in North Korea, so-called Saturday Weekly Criticism Sessions are a staple feature of socio-political life.⁹⁸ According to witness 'A', these sessions are also conducted systematically in Russia, and North Korean workers are expected to use these sessions to criticise both themselves and other workers. 'A' describes this as routine practice, and workers are trained in the critical assessment of what they perceive as 'mistakes'.⁹⁹

Although these sessions are also being conducted in the Russian context, there are differences between these sessions and those taking place in North Korea, according to 'A'. Most significantly, the issue of money is central to the sessions held in Russia. For example, sessions are characterised by self-criticism such as 'I must earn lots of money to contribute to the North, but I could not', and 'I'll be a devoted worker to my country!' These comments are repeated frequently throughout the sessions. From the perspective of effective govern-

97) Ibid., 20:40 – 21:33.

98) The Why Foundation, *Blagoveshchensk video 2*, 01:43:54:02 – 01:43:57:18.

99) Ibid., 00:50:16:00 – 00:51:13:12.

ance and surveillance, the function of these sessions mirrors the purpose of those held domestically within the North Korean context. Anyone missing a session abroad, however, would be classified as missing or as a defector.¹⁰⁰

Analysis and the apparent structural foundations of North Korean overseas labour

Even though the footage taken in Blagoveshchensk and Vladivostok shows a single case study of North Korean overseas forced labour, a comparison with previous research brings certain structural characteristics to light.

For instance, while most workers apply for work abroad to earn more money, in reality, they work around the clock and have to give a significant portion of their salary to the DPRK. The severity of workers' long hours is highlighted in testimonies. As workers are unable to earn a personal income from their regular work hours, they are forced to find additional hours at other locations, supplementing their meagre earnings by making extremely long hours. The witness testimonies reveal that it is increasingly difficult to earn money to send back to their family, or to save enough money to be able to afford a vacation back to North Korea. The working hours are exceedingly long, and it is not unusual for workers to work deep into the night to earn sufficient funds to subsist. The minimum amount of money that workers must hand over to the North Korean authorities varies, depending on the work site and the city the workers live in. In the Polish case, it was often over 50 per cent,¹⁰¹ while Park concluded that it was around 30 per cent in the construction industry.¹⁰² The footage used in this analysis puts the number at 30,000 roubles, which, according to the Russian federal statistics, is the average wage of a Russian construction worker.¹⁰³ This means that the North Korean workers have to work double hours in order to save something for themselves.

Another reoccurring factor is the use of the workers' family as a hostage. In both Park's work as in the Polish case, having a family back home is stated as an official criterion for being chosen to go abroad.¹⁰⁴ In the video analysed above it also becomes clear that having a family in North Korea is used as a form of leverage by the state to prevent the workers from leaving their workplace and defecting. Some, like 'A', decide to defect anyway, leaving their family behind in North Korea in the process. Despite this, he still worries about them and he hopes to be reunited with them in the future in South Korea.¹⁰⁵

Other criteria seem to be a good standing in North Korean society, most often characterised by residency in the capital. Notable, therefore, is that witness 'A' referred to

100) Ibid., 00:29:30:00 – 00:48:40:00.

101) Breuker and van Gardingen, *Slaves to the System*, 62.

102) Park, *Conditions of Labor and Human Rights*, 176.

103) Federal State Statistics Service (Федеральная служба государственной статистики), *Среднемесячная Номинальная Начисленная Зароботная Плата Работников По Полному Кругу организаций По Видам Экономической Деятельности В Российской Федерации В 2013-2016гг*, http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/ross-tat_main/rosstat/ru/statistics/wages/ (accessed 31 May 2018).

104) Breuker and van Gardingen, *Slaves to the System*, 57; Park, *Conditions of Labor and Human Rights*, 100.

105) The Why Foundation, *Blagoveshchensk video 2*, 00:48:25:11 – 00:48:39:10.

his co-workers collectively as ‘simple country folk’ coming from the provinces,¹⁰⁶ implying that he did not see many people for Pyongyang while he was at work.

It is apparent from the footage that there is some form of surveillance present that keeps tabs on the workers, around the clock. The surveillance described in Blagoveshchensk even reveals a cooperative framework between Russian and North Korean authorities, which is corroborated by Park’s research and also not considered unique in Russia where the police have been accused before of assisting companies who employ migrants with forced labour.¹⁰⁷ The extent to which this is structurally implemented and enacted requires further investigation, yet the confiscation of possible video and audio material strongly hints towards the exploitation of forced North Korean labour in Blagoveshchensk continuing to be facilitated by local officials. Similarly, in Vladivostok, a foreman takes on the role of a supervising authority, stepping in to prevent engagement.¹⁰⁸ Regardless of the position of the research team, whether posing as tourists or investors, the North Korean authorities do not want outsiders having contact with North Korean workers. This is reaffirmed by the inevitable presence of their representatives at the work sites and their assertive attitude towards practising surveillance and preventing possible contact.

In the workers’ living quarters, North Korean propaganda posters and newspapers decorate their surroundings, showing that the DPRK system follows them abroad. The testimonies taken in Blagoveshchensk also mention the obligatory weekly criticism sessions during which a worker is expected to self-reflect and show his dedication to the North Korean ideology. The study done in Poland touches upon these meetings as well, which often required written letters and were compulsory for all.¹⁰⁹ Park, however, found that in many cases these sessions did not happen as often as planned as the workers were simply too busy to spend time in these meetings.¹¹⁰

Taking all of this into consideration, it seems that the DPRK is capable of exporting its labour force abroad on its own conditions, making the labourers work in inhumane conditions with very limited freedom, while institutionalised operations make it impossible for them to improve their situation.

Conclusion

An exploration of North Korean forced labour practices in Russia is largely absent from academic literature and certainly remains underdeveloped. This means that any investigations must rely on the few sources available. This chapter attempts to add to this body of work by exploring visual and audio material gathered in Russia, to delve deeper into the issue. The analysis presented here covers the Russian cities of Vladivostok and Blagoveshchensk, both located in the eastern part of Russia.

106) Ibid., 00:47:48:17 – 00:48:14:19.

107) Park, *Conditions of Labor and Human Rights*, 184; Elena Tyuryukanova, *Forced labour in the Russian federation today*, 64.

108) The Why Foundation, *Dollar Heroes*, 14:35 – 15:32.

109) Breuker and van Gardingen, *Slaves to the System*, 86.

110) Park, *Conditions of Labor and Human Rights*, 228.

The findings presented in this chapter suggest that North Korean workers do not arrive in Russia involuntarily. Indeed, moving to Russia for work is frequently a response to intolerable conditions in their home country and an assertive attempt to improve their circumstances. Nevertheless, the system that governs the workers' time and labour at home is exported with them across the North Korean border. Leaving their families behind, the workers are unable to defect without making a tremendous personal sacrifice. Indeed, their families serve as leverage, ensuring obedience, and strict surveillance is practised to prevent these workers from coming into contact with undesirable elements.

Despite believing they may be able to make more money abroad, workers often make too little to save or send back to their families and are forced to work long regular shifts. Therefore, they have to supplement these already demanding shifts by working extreme hours at different locations in order to be able to save some money for themselves. Starting early in the morning and working deep into the night, sleep deprivation is inevitable. Moreover, workers are required by the North Korean authorities to earn a minimum amount, which is then handed over to the state. Although these quotas differ per location and workplace, they can rise to unrealistic heights making it incredibly difficult for workers to subsist. Taking a break from work is possible, but this also requires a worker to 'buy off' the time spent away.

The mandatory weekly self-criticism sessions, combined with a strictly regulated living environment means that these workers have few freedoms they can enjoy. The export of this system across the North Korean border is significant, as it shows that the state is capable of bringing its own systems of governance into a foreign country. As a comparison with other research and places shows, North Korean forced labour follows a regimented pattern which highlights the persistence of forced labour conditions across workplaces. We can also conclude that, unless this system is prevented from being exported, these harsh conditions can be replicated across the globe in any place willing to exploit the cheap labour offered by North Korea.

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