

Making “Refugees”: Repatriates, Migrants, and Institutions of Care in Liberated South Korea, 1945–1950

Alyssa PARK

This article examines the making of “refugees” in post-liberation South Korea (1945–1950). It shows that refugees were produced as a recognized social group through various institutions that coordinated their movement and engaged in care work, including the U.S. military, grassroots relief societies, and organs of the nascent South Korean government. After August 1945, millions of repatriates from Japan, Manchuria, and other parts of the Japanese empire “returned” to Korea. They were joined by migrants from the Soviet-occupied North. These sudden and simultaneous movements had profound demographic and social consequences for the South. The influx of refugees resulted in a near twenty-percent increase in the South’s population and captivated the attention of the public and U.S. occupation forces, which came to see refugees as a critical foreign policy question. Problems wrought by colonial-era war mobilization, postwar shortages, division, and occupation were visibly reflected in the refugee population, especially in Seoul, where they formed communities. The neediest subset of refugees became the new indigent class of the South. Through a focus on refugees and institutions of care, this article places South Korea in broader post-WWII history and eschews the ideological binaries of the Cold War that has guided much of historical scholarship on the period.

Keywords: Refugees, migration, repatriation, relief, welfare, liberation

Alyssa Park (alyssa-park@uiowa.edu) is an associate professor at University of Iowa

Seoul Journal of Korean Studies 36, no. 2 (December 2023): 621–654.

© 2023 Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies