

FEATURE

JAPANESE COLONIALISM IN KOREA

1910-1945

A DOCUMENT-BASED ESSAY EXERCISE

By Linda Karen Miller

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Keijo, or Seoul under Japanese occupation

THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION OF KOREA 1910-1945

In the late nineteenth century, there was a general race for colonies among the major imperial powers as each nation tried to carve out spheres of influence for trade and pursued colonial ambitions. Korea was caught in the conflict among China, Russia, and Japan as each sought to make it a colony. Other powers, like Britain, France, and the United States also were involved. Korea, which was just emerging from its self-imposed isolation, faced the rival ambitions of these countries.

In the past, when Korea was faced with danger, it had chosen to be the “younger brother” of China. But by the late nineteenth century, China had been buffeted by western powers, particularly by Britain and Russia, and it faced a major threat in the growing power of a rapidly industrializing Japan.

Japan created a modern army and navy and viewed Korea and Manchuria as areas for industrial and agricultural expansion. The Korean government, under the Choson Dynasty, moved more slowly toward reform and still looked to China for protection. This protection, however, looked less promising after China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1895).

Japan further established its influence over Korea when it triumphed in the Russo-Japanese War (1905). Western powers, like the United States and Britain, did little to interfere with Japan’s efforts to establish its sphere of influence in Korea. The Koreans, however, resisted attempts to limit their independence.

Through a series of maneuvers, which included the assassination of members of the Korean royal family, the Japanese gained influence in Korea. In 1910, Japan officially took control of Korea and renamed it Chosen.

Japanese occupation of Korea lasted until 1945 when the Japanese were defeated in World War II. Following the war, Korea was divided by Western powers. Russia occupied Korea north of the thirty-eighth parallel, and the United States occupied Korea south of the thirty-eighth parallel.

Under Japanese rule from 1910 to 1945, Koreans struggled to maintain their culture. The Japanese banned the teaching of the Korean language and history and burned many historical documents. Koreans were forced to take Japanese names and to speak and teach in the Japanese language.

Many Korean farmers were forced off their lands while others had to fulfill grain quotas

for Japan's needs. Buildings were taken over for Japanese military and government purposes, and Korean businesses were handed over to Japanese officials.

The Japanese occupation of Korea went through several phases, sometimes relatively benign but often very oppressive. Korean nationalists were divided and could not maintain a united policy of opposition. Some groups wanted close ties to the West and called for reforms based on western ideas. Other groups sought a return to Confucian values and Korean traditions. Still others, influenced by the 1917 Russian Revolution, preferred a Korea founded on Marxist (communist) ideals. These divisions are still present in Korea today, but they were especially difficult to reconcile during the Japanese occupation.

Early in the occupation, it seemed possible that Korean nationalists might unite to oust Japan. On March 1, 1919, the independence movement erupted as students in Seoul protested against Japanese rule, and a declaration of independence was read. Support for the movement was widespread, but two factors were especially critical. One was the death of the last Korean king and rumors that he too, had been assassinated by the Japanese. His funeral, and Japanese restrictions on mourning by Koreans, set the stage for the uprising.

Another significant factor for the March 1 movement was the attempt by Koreans to appeal to the world community. The Treaty of Versailles had been recently negotiated to end World War I. During the negotiations, President Woodrow Wilson of the United States had asserted that self-determination should underpin the new world peace and had called for a League of Nations. These ideas appealed to Koreans who claimed the right to govern themselves as a sovereign nation. The Japanese government took a different view and harshly put down the uprising. Thousands of people who had demonstrated or were thought to be sympathetic to the independence movement were arrested and

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imprisoned. Many Koreans died from beatings, torture, and poor prison conditions. Others went into exile and continued to work for Korean independence in Manchuria, Shanghai, or the United States.

In the 1920s the Japanese government responded to criticism of its harsh rule in Korea by easing some of its restrictive policies. They allowed the publication of some books and magazines in Korean and began to invest in education, roads, and government buildings. The Japanese claimed that they were modernizing Korea and providing opportunities for trade.

But by the 1930s, the Japanese government itself was increasingly under the control of the military. Assassination of moderate officials, both in Korea and Japan, removed those who advocated lenient measures in Korea. As Japan began its conquest of Manchuria and China, it increasingly perceived Korean independence as a threat. Koreans, the government proclaimed, were part of the Japanese empire, so their language, religion, and culture had to be the same as those of the Japanese.

During World War II, Japan employed Koreans in its military efforts. Koreans were drafted into the Japanese army or had to work

under dangerous, slave-like conditions. The Japanese military kidnapped thousands of Korean girls and women and forced them to serve as comfort women who were raped by Japanese soldiers. Japan still refuses to accept responsibility for this policy, creating a bitter issue between Korea and Japan.

After the defeat of Japan in 1945, Korea recovered its independence. But the long and painful history that Korea and Japan share remains a cause of contention to this day. Many issues left over from the colonial era have not been resolved nor have the feelings of Koreans been healed. The legacy of this era still affects how these two major countries view their roles in the Pacific Rim.