The Effects of Japanese Colonization in Korea

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The Japanese colonizers caused a long lasting impact on the Koreans. During World War Two, with the permission of America, the Japanese used the Koreans as pawns in their army. If you compare the deaths in relation to other cases of colonization, there weren’t that many, but the results have caused millions of deaths. After World War Two, Korea was split into the North and South, which caused the Korean War, killing millions of soldiers from all sides of the war. The Korean War ended in a truce, but both sides are constantly living under the threat of war starting again. Under the rule of Kim Jong-un, North Koreans are stripped of their rights and are malnourished, causing even more death. Even though only a few thousand died during the Imperial Japanese Rule, modern day Koreans are forced to live in the aftermath. One could argue that after the Japanese left, America took over and continued their colonization, eventually causing the split between the North and South of Korea.

Between the years of 1910 and 1945, Korea was under colonial rule from the Japanese. Korea used to be one country instead of split up into the North and South. The split happened after Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945, ending World War Two. The Soviets and Americans could not decide on a government system for Korea so the United States took the south and the
Soviet Union took the north, splitting the country on the 38th Parallel. Five years after World War Two ended, North Korea attacked South Korea, resulting in the three year long Korean War. Nothing was resolved after the war ended in a truce and the country still remains split (Asia for Educators).

For the first ten years of Japanese rule over Korea, they were incredibly strict. They ruled through their military and forced the Koreans to fight on their side in the war and work in their factories. On March 19, 1919, the Koreans had a nationwide protest that ended with the Japanese allowing more freedom for the citizens. As a result of the Japanese rule, Korea became the second most industrialized country in Asia, the first being the Japanese themselves. They become more modernized as the Japanese began to industrialize Korea by building roads, new buildings and factories (Asia for Educators).

The Japanese were only doing this to help distinguish themselves against their western allies such as Germany and Italy. “Japan’s response to the penetration of the western powers in eastern Asia was to ‘modernize’, to strive to achieve the same military and economic standards as the nations imposing their rule on Asia” (Grayson 439). Along with forcing the Koreans to fight in the war, they banned the Korean language in schools, pressured 80% of the country to change their names to Japanese names, and used Korean women as sex slaves calling them “comfort women”. There were an estimated 20,000 to 200,000 women that were taken from their families. The women were forced to be taken advantage of by hundreds of Japanese soldiers each over the period of many months.

The comfort women have been something the Japanese have been refusing to acknowledge until very recently. For many years they have been ignoring the fact that the comfort women even existed. In 2007 the United States demanded an apology and compensation for the victims of this sexual abuse from Japan’s
prime minister, Shinzo Abe. “It came in the form of an ‘I express my sympathy toward the comfort women and apologize for the situation they found themselves in’” (Park 204). By saying this he avoided responsibility and put it on the comfort women themselves, blaming them for the actions they were forced to do. Inuhiko Yomota agrees and blames the Koreans for what happened to these women, but there are many testimonies from the victims that make it clear it was Japanese authorities that forced them into these situations. Maria Rosa Henson was only 14 years old when she was taken to Angeles after being arrested by Japanese authorities. Henson was forced to have sex with hundreds of men over the course of nine months. “Sometimes 12 soldiers would force me to have sex with them and then they would allow me to rest for a while, then about 12 soldiers would have sex with me again” (qtd. in “Testimonies of the Victims”). Comfort women were forced to have hysterectomies to avoid pregnancy. They were not given any treatment for STD’s, were physically abused by the soldiers, and sometimes left to die.

On December 28, 2015, Fumio Kishida, the Japanese foreign minister, and Yun Byung-se, the South Korean foreign minister, met in Seoul to discuss the comfort women. Japan officially apologized to the comfort women and offered around 8.3 million dollars in compensation to the 46 victims remaining in South Korea. Japan’s prime minister, Shinzo Abe called South Korea’s president Park Geun-hye later that day to also apologize. Abe said “Japan and South Korea are now entering a new era; we should not drag this problem into the next generation” (Calamur). Japan says it took so long for them to apologize because they thought the 800 million dollars in grants and loans Tokyo gave the South Korean government was enough of an apology, but South Korea did not agree. Lee Yong-soo, a past comfort woman, says “We’re not after the money. If the Japanese committed their sins, they should offer direct, official government compensation” (Calamur).
Both sides of the feud are nervous that this was not enough of an apology. Japan has given half hearted apologies before and some people think this was not meant for the comfort women but rather just something to make themselves look better. According to the BBC, “(The comfort women) say past expressions of regret have been halfway and insincere” (Calamur).

The Japanese were able to take over Korea with the support of America. In 1905, the Taft-Katsura agreement was signed, which allowed Japan to have Korea in exchange for America to have influence over the Philippines. This exchange happened between Secretary of War, William Howard Taft and Japan’s Prime Minister Taro Katsura. This agreement remained a secret until 1925. In America there was propaganda inaccurately portraying the situation happening in Korea. In a newsreel from 1931, Siam to Korea 1931, the voiceover often uses the words funny, strange, silly and curious to describe the Korean way of life. They describe Korean men wearing traditional white robes and horse hair hats as “Korea personified” saying “he bows to the dominion of Japan but declines to admit the superiority of Japan’s intellectual and moral culture over his own” (Siam to Korea 1931). Although America did not actively show support for Japan, through the Taft-Katsura act, they played a large role in the colonization of Korea.

The rule of Japan over Korea ended approximately 70 years ago but there is still anger between the two countries. Martin Fackler comments, “the conflict is rooted in grievances going back to Japan’s brutal colonization of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945 and its attempts to extinguish the Korean culture” (Japan’s colonial rule of Korea was ‘moderate’ qtd. in Sato). But George Akita and Brandon Palmer rebuttal by saying “relative to the era of colonialism, Japan’s rule of Korea was ‘moderate’, even ‘almost fair’” (Japan’s colonial rule of Korea was ‘moderate’ qtd. in Sato) while Shin Yong-Ha, a professor in Seoul, Korea, says
that “Koreans lived under the most ruthless colonial rule ever known to history” (Japan’s colonial rule of Korea was ‘moderate’ qtd. in Sato). Statistically the colonialism in African countries killed millions of more people than the Japanese killed despite the discrepancies between Japan’s and Korea’s figures. The Japanese claim to only have killed around 553 people where the Koreans claim the number to be around 7,509. Inuhiko Yomota, the writer of this article, argues that “Japan only committed one extensive brutal act after it annexed Korea” (Japan’s colonial rule of Korea was ‘moderate’ qtd. in Sato) and it only lasted about a year and the Comfort Women were managed by other Koreans. He also compares it to the French colonizing African countries and how they advanced Korea much more. “France didn’t even bother with infrastructure in Madagascar... in contrast Japan first thought was sanitation, education, and infrastructure in its colonies” (Japan’s colonial rule of Korea was ‘moderate’ qtd. in Sato).

When Japan surrendered, ending World War Two the Americans came to try and help the Koreans by trying to find a government system that would work best for them. One could argue after the Japanese left Korea, Americans, to an extent, replaced them. “While the Japanese chronicled the end of the empire... the Americans were drawn into governing a portion of a country with which they had little experience” (Watt 166). This was what sparked the separation of North and South Korea because America and the Soviet Union could not agree on a government. The Japanese never had the respect of the Korean citizens but the Americans did. The Americans were the ones that helped the Koreans achieve freedom from Japan while they simultaneously “adopted some Japanese colonial practices” and kept a lot of the structures the Japanese created (Watt 167). In some ways the Japanese colonization ended but the Americans
continued it, or at least did not allow the Koreans complete freedom of leading themselves as a country.

After World War Two America and the Soviet Union separated the North and South with the intention of bringing them back together eventually, but the Soviet Union ruled the North using fear and violence. Eventually the North invaded the South with the approval of Joseph Stalin, which triggered the Korean War (Millett 1).

The Korean War started in 1950, with American and the United Nations supporting the South and the Soviet Union and China supporting the North. Over the 3 years of fighting, around 2.5 million people died before it ended in a truce in 1953. This total includes one quarter of North Korea’s population. Both nations tried to negotiate in 1954 with no success (Millett 2). The country is still in an armistice, a temporary suspension of hostilities by agreement of the warring parties. This means even though there is not any active fighting, the threat of war is always there.

After the split many families were not allowed to see each other anymore. After about 60 years both sides allowed a small group of people to visit their families on the opposite side. People were chosen for this trip through a computerized lottery. These visits have only happened twice and due to them being so rare, the family members will probably never see each other again. North Korea uses the possibility of these visits as a tactic to get their citizens to do what they want. There have been instances of North Korea promising people visits and then canceling them (BBC).

Between North and South Korea there is a demilitarized zone that is 151 miles long. People from both sides are not allowed to cross into this area but there are tours from the South Korean side where you can walk over the line under close watch of North and South Korean guards. The demilitarized zone was created
under the Armistice Agreement but both sides have violated this agreement by running drills and firing arms. In the demilitarized zone there is the North Korean “propaganda village” also called the “peace village” which is a fake city. There are buildings made to look like a city, but they are completely empty. The purpose is to try to lure South Koreans into the North, by attempting to make North Korea look better. For a few years they had speakers playing North Korean propaganda (Pike).

Both armies are actively trying to build up their military and flaunt their weapons. Both sides are aware of the others ability. There have been many instances of one side testing weapons and military exercises without the other’s permission, and the other side retaliating. One example of this is when North Korea bombed Yeonpyeong Island in South Korea in November 2010. North Korea fired a few dozen rounds of artillery rounds at the island, killing two South Korean soldiers and setting around 60 houses on fire, forcing the small population of 1,300 to evacuate the island (Foster).

North Korea also claims to have tested a hydrogen bomb in January of 2016, which the United States thinks might have been a lie. Regardless, tensions have been high as Kim Jong-un wants to “make the world ... look up to our strong nuclear country” (Botelho and McKirdy). The United States and South Korea have been running military drills and are “poised to act against North Korea” (Botelho and McKirdy).

North Korea runs under a Military-First policy called Songun, which puts the military’s needs as a priority over the citizens needs. This is helping with North Korea’s nuclear development but it is also having negative effects on the citizens. This means the military gets fed first, causing famine and starvation in the country. In the 1900’s, between 2.5 million and 3.7 million people died from mass starvations. In 2005, The World Food Programme found the average North Korean was only getting 50% of the
daily recommended calories and around 70% of children were having health problems related to malnutrition. Sanduk Ruitt, an eye surgeon from Nepal, says “blindness magnitude—induced by malnutrition – is one of the highest in the world” (North Korea Now). This famine is not because of the country’s farming issues or flooding, like the North Korean government claimed in the 1900’s, but it is caused by the government itself. The government prioritizes who gets food based on who is most favorable to the state. Amartya Sen, a professor from Harvard University claims “famines are, in fact, so easy to prevent that it is amazing that they are allowed to occur at all,” it is purely the government’s doing (North Korea Now). North Korean citizens are dying, going blind, and having their bodies ruined due to starvation because of their government. This could cause problems for North Korea if they do go into war again because their soldiers will not be strong enough or healthy enough to last long in war.

It is hard to estimate how long the tension between North and South Korea will continue, especially with the constant threat of another war. Korea is understandably upset with Japan since their actions during World War Two have lead to even more war and inevitably the splitting of their countries. Anger against Japan is still incredibly prevalent in South Korea and there are examples of it everywhere. Many South Koreans are waiting for a sincere apology from Japan before they are willing to let go of the hatred. America has given no public apology for the Taft-Katsura agreement, but after helping South Korea after the World War Two and during the Korean War, the Koreans are appreciative despite America’s contribution to the issues in Korea. Compared to other cases of colonization, Japan did not kill as many people as the European counties but the effect has been long lasting and has caused more war, deaths, and the
separation of families. As shown in the news and media there is no clear sign of the feud ending anytime soon.

Works Cited


Park, You-me. “Compensation to Fit the Crime: Conceptualizing a Just Paradigm of Reparation for Korean “Comfort Women”.” *Comparative studies of
Questions to Consider:

Content
1. What historical context is provided to understand the situation in North and South Korea?
2. What evidence is provided by the author for America’s role in Korea’s history?
3. What role does the author argue “comfort women” played in the political turmoil?

Style
4. In addition to statistics, what is presented from the sources to support the author’s argument?
5. How would you describe the organization of the argument? How is the logic of the argument created through the essay’s structure?

6. How does the author transition between historical information and the main arguments being presented in the essay?

7. How do the sources being used affect the ethos of the argument?