

Chapter 3: The Russo-Japanese War

7. EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE ANNEXATION OF KOREA

Disingenuous Korean declaration of neutrality

During the dozen or so years after the Russo-Japanese War ended, numerous events occurred that ended up transforming not only the Asian, but also the world political situation. They included the Japanese annexation of Korea, the 1911 (Xinhai) Revolution in China, Japan's Twenty-One Demands of China, the struggle for supremacy over the Manchurian Railway, US exclusionist laws against Japanese immigration, the Russian Revolution, the Siberian Intervention, as well as the repercussions of the 1st World War. Among these events, only the Japanese annexation of Korea brought some stability to the Far East. The others, without exception, became underlying causes of subsequent crises and conflicts.

The Russo-Japanese War provided encouragement to independence movements all over the world. The only exception was Korea, which Japan eventually annexed. At first the annexation seemed like an inconsistency, but it was closely connected to the fact that Korea was the primary cause of the Russo-Japanese War. I will now discuss the chain of events that led to the annexation, which left deep, lingering emotional scars on both the Japanese and Korean people.

In January 1904, when relations between Japan and Russia became tense, the Korean court, out of the blue, secretly dispatched telegrams to the Western powers declaring "strict neutrality." Russia, however, ignored the telegram, having already taken control of Seoul. The declaration, which would have prevented the withdrawal of Russian troops, was nothing more than a scrap of paper.

In fact, that peculiar document, peculiar in the sense that no hostilities had yet taken place, was a strategic move on the part of the Russians. Should war break out with Russia, the Japanese would certainly choose Korea as a route for their troops. Therefore, prodded by the Russians to bar the Japanese military from using Korean territory, the Korean government issued a premature declaration of neutrality. The disingenuous nature of the declaration soon became clear. Several days after it was issued, the Japanese seized a small craft on the Yellow Sea carrying a Korean, the bearer of a letter requesting troops from Port Arthur. Astonishingly, the senders of the letter were the very officials who issued the declaration.

That letter served as proof that, in this instance, Korean neutrality was a sham.¹

The aforementioned Canadian journalist F.A. Mackenzie was in Korea at that time. He interviewed then Korean Prime Minister Yi Yong-jik² not long before hostilities between Japan and Russia erupted.

¹ Homer B. Hulbert, *The Passing of Korea* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1906), 189-190; <https://archive.org/details/passingofkorea00hulbuoft/mode/2up> (retrieved 05/2023).

² Also spelled Yi Yung-ik.

One personal recollection of these last days before the war remains stamped on my memory. I was in Seoul and had been invited to an interview with Yi Yung-ik. (...) I urged on him the necessity of reform, if Korea was to save herself from extinction. Yi quickly retorted that Korea was safe, for her independence was guaranteed by America and Europe.

“Don’t you understand,” I urged, “that treaties not backed by power are useless [?]. If you wish the treaties to be respected, you must live up to them. You must reform or perish.”

“It does not matter what the other nations are doing,” declared the Minister. “We have this day sent out a statement that we are neutral and asking for our neutrality to be respected.”

“Why should they protect you, if you do not protect yourself?” I asked.

“We have the promise of America. She will be our friend whatever happens,” the Minister insisted.

From that position he would not budge.³

This was just one instance of Koreans pinning their hopes on others (Europe and the US), while at the same time being unwilling to lift a finger to secure their own independence.

Significance of the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1904

In February, in the early days of the Russo-Japanese War, Japan began winning battles. The Koreans then made an abrupt shift from a pro-Russian to a pro-Japanese stance, and the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1904 was concluded. According to that pact, (1) Korea would accept advice from Japan about improving the administration of the Korean government, and (2) if Korea were endangered, Japan would expropriate such territory as was necessary for military purposes. With this treaty, the traditional Japan-Korea relationship changed, clearly marking the first step toward Korea’s becoming a protectorate.

The outbreak of hostilities between Japan and Russia marked the beginning of the historical process by which Korea was annexed by Japan, which advanced with the progress of the war. Korea’s precarious political situation precipitated the Russo-Japanese War, and the war precipitated annexation: an unfortunate historical fate whereby Korea was swallowed up.

The 1904 treaty, which permitted the use of Korean territory for military purposes should an emergency arise, did infringe, in some ways, upon Korean sovereignty.

³ Frederick A. McKenzie, *Korea’s Fight for Freedom* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1920), 77-78; <https://archive.org/details/KoreasFightForFreedom/page/n73/mode/2up?q=yi+yong-jik&view=theater> (retrieved 05/2023).

But if we sit back and think for a moment, we will realize that in the absence of the 1904 treaty, Japan could not have advanced troops from the Korean peninsula to Manchuria. The execution of the war against Russia would have been impossible. Russia, not Japan, would have emerged victorious from the conflict. The reason why, during the diplomatic negotiations between Japan and Russia held prior to the war, the Russians had opposed the use of Korean territory by Japan for military purposes, and the reason why the Russians had instigated the Koreans to declare neutrality, was exactly that. Yes, it is true that the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1904 opened the way for Korea's becoming a Japanese protectorate. But at the same time, it rescued Korea from perpetual Russian control. If we take a close look at history, we will see that the true tragedy of Korea was that its shift to a pro-Japanese stance did not occur until hostilities broke out.

First step toward administrative reform: getting rid of bad money

Six months after the conclusion of the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1904, the Japan-Korea Agreement of August 1904 was signed. It required the Korean government to hire one Japanese national to serve as financial advisor, and one foreign national recommended by the Japanese government to serve as diplomatic advisor. These actions formed the first stage of the administrative reforms mentioned in the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1904.

Megata Tanetarō, who had long served as the director-general of the Tax Bureau, part of the Japanese Ministry of Finance, was installed as financial advisor. He took advantage of the skills he had acquired at the ministry and undertook a herculean task: putting Korea's muddled finances in order. The first task he addressed was currency reform.

The famous gibe of a British Consul in an official report, that the Korean coins might be divided into good, good counterfeits, bad counterfeits, and counterfeits so bad that they can only be passed off in the dark, was by no means an effort of imagination.⁴

Megata resolutely and effortfully set about improving Korean finances. To put a stop to excessive production of paper currency, he closed the mints in Yongshan and Incheon. He entrusted the work of the Korean government's national treasury to the Keijō (Seoul) branch of the Dai'ichi Bank, a Japanese institution. Megata also arranged for the unlimited circulation of notes issued by that same bank.

Under the old methods, Korean money was among the worst in the world. (...) Mr. Megata changed all this, and put the currency on a sound basis, naturally not without some temporary trouble, but certainly with permanent benefit to the country.⁵

⁴ F.A. McKenzie, *The Tragedy of Korea* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1889), 111; <https://archive.org/details/tragedyofkorea00mcke/page/n7/mode/2up> (retrieved 05/2023).

⁵ *Ibid.*

Korea's protectorate status brings stability to East Asia

How did impartial third parties feel about the protectorate, now that Korea's finances and diplomatic affairs were under Japanese supervision? Tyler Dennett, a prominent American historian, believed that it would bring stability to East Asia.

The Koreans, in their recent history, and in most of the diplomatic representatives in Washington during the period since the President had been a resident of the city, could not have commended themselves to his respect or admiration. ... [I]t appears to have been evident to the President that Korea, long a derelict state, a menace to navigation, must now be towed into port and secured.⁶

At no time did Roosevelt interfere in the process by which Korea became a Japanese protectorate. He did, however, express his opinion in a postscript to a brief note sent to Secretary of State John Hay: "We cannot possibly interfere for the Koreans against Japan. They could not strike one blow in their own defence."⁷

British Foreign Secretary Henry Lansdowne, also voiced a similar opinion:

It has, however, become evident that Corea, owing to its close proximity to the Japanese Empire and its inability to stand alone, must fall under the control and tutelage of Japan.⁸

From these citations we can see that there was a common understanding worldwide of the Korean problem.

Ijinhoe: source of strength to Japan

The Korean government had little faith in Japan's ability to win the Russo-Japanese War. It adopted a noncommittal stance, and despite the existence of the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1904, did not lift a finger to aid the Japanese military in executing their operations. However, among ordinary Korean citizens were many who understood, at least to some extent, why it was important for Japan to win, and who were kindly disposed toward the Japanese military. Their acts certainly deserve to be recorded in the annals of history.

In the early days of the war, the aforementioned F.A. Mackenzie traveled in the northern part of Korea. He wrote that "everywhere I heard from the people during the first few weeks nothing but expressions of friendship to the Japanese." He explained that it was the conduct of Japanese soldiers that motivated such goodwill. Troops were disciplined, and they treated even the enemy

⁶ Tyler Dennett, *Roosevelt and the Russo-Japanese War* (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1959), 110-11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

with benevolence. When they requisitioned provisions, they paid fair prices for them, so the Korean people could not help but feel well-disposed toward them.⁹

MacKenzie added that “the coolies and farmers were friendly because they hoped that Japan would modify the oppression of the native magistrates. A large section of better-class people, especially those who had received some foreign training, were sympathetic, because they credited Japan’s promises and had been convinced by old experience that no far-reaching reforms could come to their land without foreign aid.”¹⁰

The best known pro-Japanese Korean group, Iljinhoe, was formed in the fall of 1904, when the Russo-Japanese War was at its height. Heading the Iljinhoe, with its purported million members, was Yi Yonggu, a former officer of the now-defunct Donghak Party. The five principal aims of Iljinhoe were (1) respect and honor the Korean court, (2) protect the people’s lives and property, (3) improve government, (4) ameliorate management of financial and military affairs, and (5) give full support to the Japanese military.

Yi Yonggu viewed the war as a crucial conflict against Russia, which represented the encroaching Western powers. He believed that a military alliance with Japan would change Korea’s fortunes by halting Russian aggression and helping Asia recover. At a time when the prevailing mood in Korea was decidedly anti-Japanese, Iljinhoe’s efforts to assist Japan, both in word and deed, were fraught with the greatest of difficulties. Nevertheless, Iljinhoe kept moving ahead, never wavering from its commitment.

At that time the railroad in Korea extended only from Busan to Seoul. Service between Seoul and Sinuiju, needed to transport Japanese troops to Manchuria, did not exist because no track had been laid.

Since the Korean government was unhelpful, Japanese troops were experiencing great difficulties. But Iljinhoe stepped in and took action. To transport weapons and ammunition to the north, the organization formed a Northward-Bound Corps, an enterprise that was accompanied by enormous challenges, difficulties, and sacrifices.

Approximately 150,000 Iljinhoe members from Hwanghae, South Pyongan, and North Pyongan provinces participated in the construction of the Gyeongui Line (extending from Seoul to Sinuiju). Another 115,000 members were mobilized to transport munitions from northern Korea to Manchuria using *jige*, wooden devices carried on their backs. The transport corps and the construction corps, taken together, accounted for 260,000-270,000 of the Iljinhoe’s million members. A look at contemporaneous records referring to wage receipts amounting to ¥26,410 and out-of-pocket expenses paid by members amounting to ¥122,704 tells us that the majority of the cost of building the railroad was borne by the members themselves.

⁹ McKenzie, *The Tragedy of Korea*, 110.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The Iljinhoe members were motivated by both anguish and hope to take selfless action. Their desire to rebuild their country and all of East Asia gave them the courage to make an enormous investment in the Russo-Japanese War, braving a host of hardships: the dangers posed by war, accidents, illness, and high costs, all of which were compounded by harassment from anti-Japanese Korean government officials.¹¹

Despite the fact that a harmonious relationship and deep understanding developed between Japanese and Koreans, Mackenzie observed that the selfish, volent acts of “petty tradesmen,” merchants who followed Japanese troops to Korea, alienated the Korean people. To make matters worse, as the Japanese accumulated more victories, soldiers “began to acquire a more domineering air.”¹²

In addition to the exhilaration that comes with victory, there must have been other reasons that would explain Japanese soldiers’ objectionable behavior. Still, as their compatriot, I am filled with sorrow at the thought that immoral and depraved acts committed by some Japanese alienated Koreans who, for a time, trusted the Japanese and went to great lengths to help them.

Protectorate treaty leads to annexation

In August 1905, while the Russo-Japanese War was still in progress, the Second Anglo-Japanese Alliance was signed. The terms of the treaty included British recognition of Korea as a Japanese protectorate. When the war ended with a Japanese victory, there were no longer any impediments to Korea’s new status. At the conclusion of the Portsmouth Peace Conference in 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt told Komura Jutarō, Japan’s foreign minister, that making Korea a protectorate was the only way to eradicate future problems, and that it was the optimal strategy, as far as for stability in Korea and peace in the Far East were concerned. Foreign Secretary Lansdowne was even more definitive, stating that not only did Great Britain have no objection to actions taken by Japan vis à vis Korea, but also sincerely hope they would bear fruit. In November the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty was concluded, and Japan thus acquired control over Korean diplomatic affairs.

Reports have it that during negotiations relating to the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty, (now) Emperor Gojong begged Itō Hirobumi any number of times to preserve the dignity and at least the outward appearance of Korea as a nation. It is difficult not to sympathize with Gojong. In his place I myself might have been cowed by Itō’s overbearing demeanor during those negotiations. However, when we are reminded that Korea’s ever-changing diplomatic strategy, which tended to veer from one extreme to the other, was a major factor behind Far Eastern instability, and that it was the primary cause of the Russo-Japanese War, the decision to make Korea a protectorate was, within the context of history, the next logical step to take.

In Korea one event gave rise to the next. Gojong secretly dispatched envoys to the Hague Convention of 1907 to lobby for rendering the protectorate null and void, but their efforts ended

¹¹ Ōhigashi, Kunio, *Ri Yōkyū no shōgai* (Life of Yi Yonggu) (Tokyo: Jiji Tsūshinsha, 1962).

¹² Mackenzie, *The Tragedy of Korea*, 51.

in failure. As a result, Gojong was forced to abdicate, and Sunjong was installed as the new emperor in July of that year. At just about the same time the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1907 was signed, and Japan took control of Korean domestic affairs and began supervising administrative improvements. With renovation as the new national policy Japan began implementing modernization policies of every description, including politics, administration of justice, industry, education, and sanitation. With the exception of one battalion, the palace guard, the Korean armed forces were disbanded.

Without a doubt, the abrupt reform of Korea's antiquated, backward society claimed its victims. In 1908 Korean immigrants assassinated Durham Stevens, an adviser to the Korean Foreign Office, while he was on furlough in the US. Then, in October of the following year, Itō Hirobumi was assassinated by independence activist An Jung-geun. These events may have hastened the process, but in any case, in August 1910, Korea was annexed by Japan, and the Joseon dynasty, which had lingered for more than 500 years, came to an end.

Hopelessly backward Korean society

Korean society was extremely primitive. Not only were its institutions and civilization backward, but also its thought patterns. In the minds of the Korean people, modernization represented evil. This rigid mindset pervaded all classes of Korean society, and presented a perverse barrier to Korean modernization. Even the introduction of electric trains into Korea became an impetus for riots.

Korea, Fact and Fancy, compiled by Horace Allen, an American missionary, contains a chronology of the chief events in Korea. Allen records several incidents involving electric trains. In August 1901 two Korean men sleeping on a railroad track and using the rails as pillows were decapitated by a train. In October 1903 a train ran over and killed a Korean child; a riot ensued, and the Japanese police turned out to calm the mob. In January 1904 a Korean coolie was hit and killed by a train and, again, a riot broke out, necessitating the mobilization of the U.S. guards.¹³

To learn why such incidents were so frequent, I turned again to MacKenzie's *The Tragedy of Korea*.

When the electric tramway was first opened in Seoul, the drivers and conductors were greatly hindered because coolies constantly slept in the roadways, and used the rails as pillows. The conductors became quite expert in throwing these men off the track. It is said— although I cannot guarantee the truth of this story— that a number of high officials presented a petition to the Emperor protesting against the action of the tramway company. The petitioners pointed out that sleep is natural for man, and that to disturb sleep suddenly is injurious. They therefore begged the Emperor to issue a command to the tramway drivers that when they came upon a man sleeping across the track, they should stop their cars and wait until he awoke.

¹³ Horace N. Allen, *Korea, Fact and Fancy* (Seoul: Methodist Publishing House, 1904), 219, 234; <https://archive.org/details/koreafactfancybe00alle/mode/2up> (retrieved 05/2023).

One or two people sleeping in this manner on the line were run over and killed. Thereupon a mob rose, destroyed a tramcar and nearly killed the driver. The leaders were arrested and brought before a city judge. When asked what excuse they had, the leader spoke out vigorously. "Our fathers have told us," he said, "that we must on no account disturb the stone tortoise which sleeps outside our city gates." (...) "They told us that once the tortoise awakes, great troubles will happen to our country. Now the hissing of these electric cars will awaken the tortoise, and we are not going to have it. The cars must stop!"¹⁴

The preceding excerpt shows how hopelessly backward and ignorant Korean society was at the time. No one can deny that the prevailing mentality, which equated modern reforms with Japanese aggression and viewed modernization as criminal, had a profoundly negative influence on the advancement of Korean society.

Righteous armies and their battles

Armed organizations that arose in Korea for the stated purpose of saving their country were called Righteous armies. Anti-Japanese Righteous armies emerged in 1895 subsequent to the assassination of Queen Min. But the Righteous-armies movement gained momentum in 1907 after the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1907 was concluded and the Korean military was disbanded. The unemployed soldiers joined the Righteous armies, which then acquired weapons and organization; fierce anti-Japanese strife ensued throughout Korea.

When confronted with the argument that the Korean people lacked the desire and the preparation to become independent, the Koreans argue, "just look at the tremendous feats of the Righteous armies. If you look at the frightful energy of those armies, you cannot say that Koreans are shiftless and wretched."

I will concede to the fierceness of the Righteous-army movement. Reports have it that the armies participated in 2,850 conflicts, and that more than 14,000 of their number were killed during those conflicts. Perhaps I should attribute the horror of their acts to "the energy of resentment" characteristic of the Korean people.

Enmity and hatred — in the case of Korea, the target would be Japan — can sometimes indeed give rise to fierce energy. But with energy that stems from the anger of a people, and only energy, a nation cannot achieve modernization or independence. Populist energy can never become the driving force behind an independence movement unless the people are united behind powerful leaders pursuing goals that will benefit them.

The energy of the Righteous armies was the product of hatred and enmity aimed at Japan and the Japanese. It was indeed a tremendous force, but unfortunately it did not come at the proper time. A comparison with Japan's renovation movement at the end of the shogunate should provide an important perspective when considering the modern history of Korea.

¹⁴ McKenzie, *The Tragedy of Korea*, 101-102.

Spirit of the Korean Declaration of Independence

It is possible that I will become the target of criticism for what is perceived to be an unsympathetic view of Korea. Although I do not heap praise upon Korean history and its people, neither do I disparage them. I am the first one to praise excellence when I recognize it. For instance, when I read the Korean Declaration of Independence, written some years later (on March 1, 1919), I was deeply touched by its nobility of spirit and the breadth of its scope. I believe that it is one of the most skillfully crafted documents of the century. At the same time, it distresses me greatly that though the Korean people possessed such noble ideals and generosity of spirit, they failed to use those qualities to set their sights on and achieve independence.

A terrible tragedy

I have provided a cursory account of the events that transpired between the Russo-Japanese War and the Japanese annexation of Korea. For the Korean people, those years represent a terribly tragic episode in their history, and I do not blame them for viewing them as Japanese “aggression.” When I attempt to put myself in the Korean emperor’s place as he begged the condescending representatives of the Japanese government to allow Korea to retain some semblance of sovereignty, I cannot help but empathize with him and his love for his country. Moreover, I mourn the fact that my country had no choice but to adopt an unyielding, forceful policy against a neighboring nation.

However, at the same time, I feel compelled to speak out for Japan, for my own country. Despite the fact that Japan, well before any other nation, recognized Korea as an independent nation, Korea was unable to achieve independence. Consequently, Japan was forced to risk its own destiny by waging two wars. Because the Japanese were loath to wage a third war, they revoked Korean independence, which in any case existed in name only, and annexed that nation.

I am convinced that in a world where survival of the fittest is, however cruel that might be, the governing principle, there was no other course for Japan to take if it valued its survival. The annexation of Korea was a terrible tragedy. But the fact that the annexation stabilized the political situation in East Asia remains there, in plain sight.