

LESSON 5

The Japanese Occupation of Korea: 1910-1945

In the late 19th century, there was a general scramble for colonies among the major world powers. In Asia, imperialist nations tried to carve out spheres of influence for trade and pursued colonial ambitions. Korea was caught up in the rivalries among China, Russia and Japan; each sought to exploit Korea and its resources.

By 1910, Japan annexed Korea and it occupied its neighbor until 1945. The Japanese occupation, as well as its present day impact, are the focus of this lesson.

LINKAGE WITH CURRICULUM

*World History
*Imperialism

MATERIALS

*Handouts
Accompanying This Lesson
*Textbook Treatments of This Time Period

Purpose of Lesson and Overview

Students will identify the changes Koreans experienced under Japanese occupation and will assess the positive and negative effects of these changes.

Students will describe current problems from the period of colonization and will examine alternative points of view on at least one of these issues.

Content Focus

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, European nations were developing spheres of influence in Asia and elsewhere. China, Russia and Japan competed for control of northern Asia. Korea, just emerging from its self-imposed isolation, was one of the prizes these countries sought.

Through a series of maneuvers — such as the assassination of members of the Korean royal family — the Japanese gained influence in Korea. By 1910, Japan officially took control of Korea and renamed it “Chosen.” This colonization lasted until 1945 when the Japanese were defeated in World War II. Russia then occupied North Korea and the United States controlled South Korea.

Between 1910 and 1945, the Japanese tried to eradicate Korean culture. Their efforts are described in this lesson. In addition, students and teachers should refer to other lessons in this curriculum project that bear directly on the period of colonization. Lesson 8 on “Women” includes information on Korean “comfort women” and on the assassination of Queen Min and Lesson 11 “Global Connections” details how Koreans emigrated to escape Japanese rule.

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The Lesson: Japanese Occupation Through the Eyes of Koreans

OPENING

1. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, countries such as Russia, Japan, France, Great Britain and the United States developed sphere of influence worldwide. From your prior discussions and readings on imperialism, what do you think Korea's role would be during the age of imperialism?

Refer to text selections here to review and extend the coverage.

READING

2. Have students read Handout 1 for background information. See if they can identify the key events surrounding the Japanese occupation of Korea as well as the reasons it lasted 35 years.

Engage students in a discussion of this reading and emphasize the timeline of key events and the context surrounding each event.

ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY SOURCES

3. Using Handout 2, students will examine how some Koreans today view the period of Japanese colonial rule.

Recently, several Koreans were asked: What do you remember most about the Japanese occupation? Their responses and other primary source data are included in Handout 2.

Divide the class into small working groups. Each group can either read all the responses in the six categories or it can select two to three categories to examine.

Ask student: "Handout 2 details how Japan ruled Korea as a colony. Review this information carefully to identify two actions in each category (i.e. education, economics) that you think are most likely to have had a lasting impact on Koreans. Be ready to explain your choices to the rest of the class. What data would you need to support your hypotheses?"

ASSESSMENT

4. After each group has had a chance to complete its list, reconvene the class. Use the six major categories as a framework for group reporting, collecting the prioritized items and categorizing these as religious, educational, economic, cultural, political, or social. Did Japanese rule affect one category more than others? Discuss the patterns that emerge from this discussion.

EXTENSION

5. Place names and ownership of territory are often sources of disagreement among nations. For example, the island of Tok-do is claimed by both Korea and Japan. The name of the East Sea (or the Sea of Japan) is also a source of contention among historians and geographers. See if you can find information on these two controversies.

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Handout I

The Japanese Occupation of Korea: 1910-1945

In the late 19th century, there was a general race for colonies among the major imperial powers as each nation tried to carve out its 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 19th 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 Kingdom, 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. By 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 war, Russia occupied North Korea while the United States controlled South Korea.

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 bureaucrats.

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 were especially difficult to reconcile during Japanese occupation.

Early in the occupation, it seemed possible that Korean nationalists might unite to oust Japan. On March 1, 1919, 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.

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

In the 1920's 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 1930's, 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 its army or had to work in 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 healed. The legacy of this era still affects how these two major countries view their roles in the Pacific Rim.

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Handout 2

Korean Reflections on the Colonial Period

DIRECTIONS

For this exercise, your group will be asked to read about Japanese actions during its occupation of Korea as they affected six categories: as religion, education, economy, culture, politics and social issues. These items include comments from Koreans who lived through the occupation as well as statements of historical facts. The Koreans were asked: “What do you remember most about the Japanese occupation?” Within each category, select up to two actions you think may have had a lasting impact on Koreans. Decide what data you would need to support your hypotheses.

CATEGORY 1 – RELIGION

Early on, Japan promised Koreans religious tolerance. But before long, the Japanese government required Koreans to pay respect to Japanese *Shinto* beliefs, especially the worship of the Japanese emperor and his ancestors.

Items:

- A. Korean Buddhist institutions were unified under Japanese Buddhist religious leadership. Japanese monks are not celibate, as most Korean Buddhist monks are.
- B. After the March 1, 1919 Independence Movement, religious leaders who were connected to “foreign” religions, especially Christianity, were persecuted. For example, 3,804 Presbyterian church leaders were arrested, 47 leaders were shot or beaten to death and 12 churches destroyed. (Kang, Wi Jo. Religion and Politics in Korea Under Japanese Rule. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1987: 25)
- C. “I had a ‘suspect’ background because my father was a Protestant minister and had attended an Australian religious conference in the 1930’s. Therefore, I wasn’t allowed to go to college or a university.” (Korean woman professor who got her education after 1945)
- D. Christian ministers and pastors lost their jobs and their churches were closed because they refused to take part in *Shinto* exercises, which involved emperor worship.
- E. Three thousand Christian leaders were arrested and scheduled to be killed on August 15, 1945 because the Japanese military feared they might start a revolt as the war was ending. (Hiroshima was bombed on August 8th, 1945.)

CATEGORY 2 – EDUCATION

The Japanese promoted education in Korea, but schools discriminated against Korean students. Schools for Japanese students in Korea prepared them for university, while schools for Koreans stressed skilled trades instead of higher education. Exceptions were made, however, for Koreans deemed exceptionally talented and politically “safe” students.

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Items:

- A. From a report by a Japanese official describing educational goals for Korea in the 1930's: "From this year, the Government-General is realizing a plan to double the number of primary schools and to extend middle school education. The fundamental principles of education on this peninsula (Korea) are:
1. the equal importance of theoretical and industrial education;
 2. the significance of citizenship,
 3. the exclusion of merely abstract education,
 4. we must eliminate the present custom of stressing intellectual training and make the development of our national spirit the essence of education."
- (Source: *Government-General of Tyosen: Annual Report, Keizo, 1937: 222*)
- B. Many government officials or military officers who served on either side during the Korean War had attended the Japanese Imperial Military Academy.
- C. The Japanese changed Ewha Womans Academy's curriculum into a high school to train women for trades. Ewha Womans University is now the largest university for women in the world.
- D. Exceptional students were permitted to attend universities in Japan, but there was no national university in Korea.
- E. By the 1930's, education was carried out in Japanese; all Korean teachers had to learn and then teach their students in Japanese.

CATEGORY 3 – ECONOMIC ISSUES

Japanese projects in Korea, particularly building its infrastructure of railroads and roads were designed to exploit Korean resources for the benefit of Japan.

Items:

- A. By 1945, Japan held almost 85% of all property in Korea, of which 83% was owned by the Japanese government or the large Japanese conglomerates, called zaibatsu. (Sung-hwa Cheong. The Politics of Anti-Japanese Sentiments in Korea. New York: Greenwood, 1991: 48)
- B. "My father had a big trucking company, but the Japanese took it over and there wasn't much we could do about it." (Korean who later became a successful business leader)
- C. Railroad lines greatly increased in Korea from 1910 to 1945.
- D. Forced from their small farms as the economy went to larger scale production, Koreans emigrated. By 1945, 11 percent of Koreans went abroad. (Andrea Savada, editor. North Korea: A Country Study. Washington: Federal Research Division, 1994: 32)
- E. "It was difficult to get work because of the Japanese who came to Korea and took the higher paying jobs." (Korean business person)

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CATEGORY 4 – CULTURAL ISSUES

During the 1920's, the Japanese permitted expressions of Korean culture, but by the 1930's their attitude was that "Koreans are to be Japanese." All indications of a separate Korean culture was to be removed.

Items:

- A. In 1940, Koreans were told to give up their Korean family names and take Japanese last names. Children could not go to school and adults could not get jobs unless they changed their names.
- B. Traditional Korean dances, like the Hahoe Mask Dance Drama, were outlawed, particularly because the folk dance dramas often mocked authority.
- C. "When in the 1950's, I wanted to learn *maedup* (Korean macrame in traditional Korean design), I could only find one master of the art to teach me. All the rest were forced to abandon their art during the occupation." (Noted artist of *maedup* art today).
- D. The Koreans had their own alphabet called *hangul*. Use of *hangul* was outlawed and all documents were written in Japanese.
- E. Japanese archaeologists excavated many ancient sites in Korea and took Korea art and cultural treasures to Japan.

CATEGORY 5 – POLITICS

Japanese officials ruled Korea.

Items:

- A. After the death of the last Korean ruler, the crown prince was forced to marry a Japanese princess and to live in Japan with only infrequent visits to Korea.
- B. To show Japanese power, the Japanese had a huge building erected between the entrance gate and the palace buildings in the old royal palace compound. The building towered over the streets of Seoul and later became the National Museum. The National Museum was torn down in 1997 because it was such a painful reminder of the Japanese occupation.
- C. Members of the Korean independence movement were arrested and killed.
- D. "During World War II, I was drafted into the Japanese army and had to fight for them whether I wanted to or not. They had a harsh army system with many beatings and they threatened your family if you did not obey." (Korean veteran of World War II)
- E. Korean officials were fired from their jobs; Japanese officials took their places.

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CATEGORY 6 – SOCIETY

In theory, the Koreans were supposed to be Japanese, but there was a double standard in the ways in which Koreans and Japanese were treated.

Items:

- A. Koreans were not allowed to attend Japanese schools.

- B. “I was a young girl during World War II and the Japanese were coming around and offering ‘good’ jobs for young women. But my parents were suspicious. They tried to get me married so the Japanese couldn’t draft me for work but I wouldn’t do it. So my parents found me a job as a clerk so they could say I was already employed. Some of the young women I knew weren’t so lucky. They were taken as ‘comfort women’ and had to be prostitutes for the army. Some never came back.” (Leader of the movement seeking reparations for Korean ‘comfort women’)

- C. “I remember that they [the Japanese] even came and took the brass bowls that we used for our ancestor ceremonies.” (Korean woman who later settled in the U.S.)

- D. Japan encouraged the Confucian ideals of respect for male authority and for one’s elders. It viewed any efforts to improve conditions for women with suspicion and suppressed them.

- E. Volunteer organizations, like the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, were suspect and had to be under the direction of the Japanese government.