4 Korea, the First World War, and the Hopes for a New World Order

4.1 Introduction

The impact of the First World War on Korea was similar to its impact on China, especially with regard to there being a nationalist eruption at its end, although the direct implications of the war were less distinct than in the national contexts of China or Japan. With regard to the Korean position during the war years, it can be emphasized that thoughts about the country’s independence were often only shared or debated among Koreans, no matter if they lived within the national borders or somewhere abroad. The Japanese annexation in 1910 had been accepted relatively silently, but the end of the First World War and the debates about a new and peaceful world order sparked the nationalist ambitions of many Koreans, who demanded their sovereignty and independence be regained from Japan. It can therefore be argued that the “confrontation with Western imperialism” caused a stress test that the different dynasties in China, Japan, and Korea had to react to, and while “the painful disintegration of the Qing imperial state in China” would cause internal power struggles and factionalism that weakened the former center of East Asia, “the creation of the centralized Meiji state out of the ruins of the Tokugawa shogunate in Japan”¹ paved the way for Japanese expansion toward the Asian mainland, where Korea would soon be turned into a colonial space for Tokyo’s imperialist ambitions. The intertwined course of the three countries, however, met yet another possible turning point at the end of the First World War, when Chinese nationalists demanded maintaining independence from Japan, while nationalists throughout Korea demanded their status as an independent nation again. Considering these preconditions for the course of events that will be recaptured in this chapter from a Korean perspective, one could argue that the three national contexts can be understood as a kind of East Asian microcosm of Immanuel Wallerstein’s world system, where Japan is the expansionist core, China the semiperiphery, where Japanese ambitions for control were still held back by some kind of national interest, and Korea an almost completely suppressed and exploited colonial space. The three histories are consequently linked to each other not only by individual ties between people but

also by international developments within East Asia, which, as a space, must be considered to be highly connected according to the economic, social, and political dynamics Wallerstein emphasized with regard to the functioning of larger world systems.2

Stressed by the arrival and the demands of the foreign powers, Japanese foreign policy turned into an aggressive and expansionist Asian form of colonialism that sought to expand the country’s influence in Korea and China and thereby became, together with Italy and Germany, one of the imperialist late-comers, but it was also “the only non-Western colonizer in modern history.”3 In contrast to the Western colonial powers in many of their colonies, Japan considered its colonial territories not only as “markets for exports, but also as strategically integrated parts of the so-called ‘Greater Japan.’ Therefore, the Japanese colonial state put considerable effort into developing infrastructure in the colonies.”4 Due to this fact, those who seek to whitewash or at least somehow excuse Japanese colonialism tend to emphasize the many positive developments, e.g. economic growth, in the territories that had been controlled by Imperial Japan in the past.5 Such arguments are similar to the narratives of the “White Man’s Burden”6 or a “Civilizing Mission”7 in the name of the progress and modernization that was necessary to bring culture and civilization to underdeveloped parts of the world and which are repeated even today to glorify the empires of the past.8

4 Ibid.
8 One example for such an approach toward the history of the British Empire, which Kim Wagner correctly called a “whitewash for Britain’s atrocities” would be Jeremy Black, Imperial Legacies. The British Empire Around the World, New York 2019. For Wagner’s full review see Kim Wagner, Imperial Legacies by Jeremy Black. Review – Whitewash for Britain’s Atrocities,
Japan’s rise to hegemony in East Asia was related to its successful economic and military policy that demanded it match the Western powers to prevent the colonization of its own territory. At the same time, older expansionist traditions that reached back to the 16th century were revived, and the idea of invading Korea had already been prominently discussed in the 1870s. Following the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), not only was Japan eventually able to become accepted as a great international power, but its military victories also allowed it to push its geostrategic influence further toward the other Asian countries.

While the so-called Triple Intervention by France, Germany, and Russia in 1895 prevented the Japanese Empire from annexing the Liaodong Peninsula in China, the Sino-Japanese War had decided the struggle for influence in Korea between China and Japan, and the war against Russia would eventually cement Japan’s standing on the Korean Peninsula, a space the Japanese decision-makers considered to be exclusively Japanese. Operating there with a free hand, Korea was soon turned into a colony that was supposed to serve Japanese interests, and its governor-general was appointed by the Emperor. This important post was given to “a military man directly responsible to the Japanese prime minister” and whose main task was to secure uncontested rule in the name of Japan. The colony was, as Jitendra Uttam emphasizes, hierarchically centralized to tighten the Japanese grip as much as possible:

The governor-general appointed all the provincial governors and the county superintendents, who finally appointed heads of each district and village. The colonial administration took one step further to assume the nation’s tradition of centralized governance. The total
number of officials in 1910 numbered 10,000; however, by 1937 that number grew to reach 87,552, comprising 52,270 Japanese and 35,282 Koreans. Ultimately, the Japanese not only intended to exploit their colony but also wanted to assimilate it to turn it into an integral part of their empire.

From 1905, and even more so after 1910, when the country was officially annexed, it was therefore the colonial experience that determined the experience of every Korean. This colonial experience, to cite Korean scholar Dong-No Kim, cannot be overemphasized with regard to understanding modern Korean history: Understanding Japanese colonialism in Korea is essential not only for reconstructing Korea’s historical experience, but also for understanding the current functioning of contemporary Korean society, which has been considerably conditioned by its colonial legacy. The First World War determined the second half of Korea’s first decade as a Japanese colony and, at the same time, marked the first nationalist eruption against Japanese rule when the March First Movement in 1919 challenged the existent order. What has been called a “Korean Revolution” was part of an international wave of protests at the end of the war, especially since the peace treaty negotiations seemed to promise a better future based on enlightened ideas that were particularly linked to US President Woodrow Wilson. As has been shown in the previous two chapters, there were riots and protests in all East Asian countries, but “[w]hereas in Japan men and women had rioted over the price of rice in 1918, in China they marched in support of national self-determination and democracy, and in Korea they demonstrated against Japanese imperialism.” The extent to which this “Wilsonian Moment” influenced

14 Ibid.
15 Kim, National Identity, p. 140.
19 Walthall, From Private to Public Patriarchy, p. 445.
the events in Korea at the end of and after the First World War will therefore be taken into closer consideration in this chapter. Before that, however, an overview of the history of Japanese imperialism and the extent to which it changed Korean society from the 1870s, and in particular from 1905, will be provided to better contextualize the events of 1919.

4.2 Korea and Japanese Imperialism

In 1876, just about a quarter-century after its own forceful opening, Japan used international law to force Korea to open its borders and become part of the international economic and political system. The year consequently marked an important watershed in Korean history, as it “brought foreign economic and political penetration” and led to the growth of internal tensions because “the increased presence of foreign traders, missionaries, and even military troops provided a target for growing peasant discontent.”

Although there were debates about reforms in the following years, the monarchy was initially not eager to allow more foreign contacts than necessary, especially since these contacts seemed to threaten not only the traditions within Korea but, first and foremost, the hierarchical order that had shaped the existent society. Young progressives, however, looked to Japan as an example of a successful modernization, i.e. Westernization, and therefore the young intellectuals who had founded the Enlightenment Party (Kaehwadang) demanded a similar course in Korean politics. One such intellectual was Park Yung-hyo (1861–1939), who, as Anne Walthall remarks, while staying in Japan, “urged the king to modernize and strengthen Korea and insisted that elevating the status of women was essential to such efforts. He wanted to prohibit spousal abuse, child marriages, and concubinage. Women should be educated by the state, widows should be allowed to remarry, and marriage should be permitted between people of different statuses.”

The treaty with Japan in 1876 – the so-called Ganghwa Treaty – consequently “opened a Pandora’s box of economic, intellectual,
political, and cultural forces that ultimately led to the fall of the Chosŏn dynasty”\footnote{25} that had ruled Korea since 1392. Although the Korean negotiators of the treaty were under the assumption that they had minimized future foreign influence as far as possible, the changes that followed, especially with regard to the capitalist transformation that would also have a tremendous impact on the country’s social structure, would challenge more than just the economic order in Korea. Peasant unrest, also stimulated by anti-foreign sentiments, increased, and Christian missionaries were not only preaching a new religious belief but also acting as cultural mediators.\footnote{26} As Michael E. Robinson emphasized, they became the first Westerners to systematically study Korean history, culture, and language; their work formed a growing Orientalist literature on Korea, with its curious mixture of exotica, condescension, critique, and praise that subsequently shaped attitudes about Korea in the West for several generations. Mission schools were active in the 1890s and became models for the establishment of secular Korean schools devoted to a nontraditional, Western-studies curriculum, which also appeared in the 1890s. The missionary schools and hospitals attracted Koreans interested in new ideas and institutions.\footnote{27}

The rule of the monarchy that had been centralized over the previous centuries and forged a relatively homogenized mass of people now began to be eroded by pressure from without and by subsequent struggles within. The “monarch’s authority was, in theory, absolute; his authority was augmented by Confucian ideology, a state orthodoxy that supported a stratified social structure,”\footnote{28} but the influx of new ideas that stimulated a debate about the future of Korea did not halt at the dynasty’s role. Conflicts between the Korean monarchy and the social elites on the one hand and the masses of the people on the other were consequently intensified by the changes that occurred in the latter part of the 19th century as Japan gradually began to increase its influence and control over its neighbor.

The struggle with modernity within Korea, like in other national contexts, was also one regarding the elite’s position and its legitimization. Confucianism, as well as education according to the Chinese classics and Chinese language, were essential for the self-understanding of the Korean elites, as the “great houses of the . . . yangban [the gentry of dynastic Korea] followed meticulously formal Confucian family ritual, and relations between yangban families and

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\footnote{25} Michael E. Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey. A Short History, Honolulu, HI 2007, p. 9.  
\footnote{26} Ibid., 9–10.  
\footnote{28} Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 15.
\end{footnotes}
individuals were governed by strict adherence to rules of etiquette strongly influ-
enced by Chinese norms.”

29 The values of the elites, however, were, in the years after 1876, challenged by Christian ideas as well as by new religious movements, like the Donghak movement (Eastern Learning), which challenged the existent order and led to internal struggles and turmoil in the late 19th century as well. King Kojong (1852–1919) was initially a relatively weak king, and his wife, Empress Myeongseong (1851–1895) – better known as Queen Min in the West –, an ambitious and powerful woman, could not make up for this weakness alone, especially since the king’s father, Yi Ha-eung (1820–1898), who had ruled Korea under the title of Heungseon Daewongun (Grand Internal Prince Heungseon) between 1864 and 1873, tried to remain in power after his son had reached the age to take over rule from his father. During his reign, however, “the Taewongun failed to redress the original balance of social and political forces that weakened the monarchy,” a fact that weakened the Korean position toward the international menaces that were becoming more and more dangerous. Like Western colonialism in the Americas, the Japanese ambitions were consequently profiting from internal struggles that had been ongoing for several years before the country was eventually opened up to and connected with the existent world order. Furthermore, Korea had to sign a treaty in the tradition of the unequal treaties Japan itself had been trying to revoke since the 1860s as they weakened the international standing of all Asian countries. The fact that Japan used similar methods with regard to Korea already points to the fact that Japan’s ambitions in that region were not really driven by Pan-Asianist ideas that considered Japan’s Asian neighbors as equals.

29 Ibid., 18. The yangban eventually were particularly criticized in nationalist writings, as they were considered to represent the major ills of Korean society. See Andre Schmid, Korea between Empires, 1895–1919, New York 2002, pp. 122–123.


31 On this relationship and see Tatiana M. Simbirteva, Queen Min of Korea. Coming to Power, in: Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch 71 (1996), pp. 41–54. On Empress Myeongseong and her role within Korean (foreign) politics see Frank Jacob, Queen Min, Foreign Policy and the Role of Female Leadership in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea, in: Elena Woodacre et al. (Eds.), The Routledge History of Monarchy, London 2019, pp. 700–717.

32 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 18.

33 Sven Saaler, Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History. Colonialism, Regionalism and Borders, London 2009. Pan-Asianist societies, like the Black Ocean Society (Gen’yōsha) or the Amur Society (Kokuryūkai) shared such an aggressive vision of pan-Asianism under Japanese leadership. On these societies see Frank Jacob, Die Thule-Gesellschaft und die Kokuryūkai.
From a Korean perspective, the danger was obviously downplayed, as its “leaders continued to view these arrangements as secondary to the primary relationship with China. Treaties simply recognized foreign demands, and multiple treaty arrangements balanced foreign powers against each other, thus preserving Korean autonomy.”34 The Korean political leadership simply underestimated the decline of China as the leading regional power and the new role of Japan as its replacement, a change in positions that would become even more obvious during and after the First World War. The opening of Korea intensified the problems the monarchy and the yangban had to face, and the foreign powers, first and foremost China and Japan, would use internal turmoil as a reason to intervene in their neighboring country. When a mutiny broke out in 1882 within the Korean Army due to poor pay and other issues within its organizational structure, both foreign powers sent troops to Korea. Due to the quick action of the Chinese, the rebels within the military were suppressed and Ko-jong was reinstated in power, and the Treaty of Chemulpo, another unequal treaty with Japan, secured the latter’s reimbursement for the destruction of Japanese property and allowed it to station Japanese soldiers in Seoul for the protection of the legation in Korea in the future.35

Korean progressives like the already-mentioned Park Yung-hyo and Kim Ok-gyun (1851–1894) were worried about these foreign interventions, and their Kaehwadang party tried to stimulate a more reform-oriented course within national politics. They had been influenced by their experiences in Japan, and intellectuals like Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), “a foremost popularizer of Western thought,”36 as well as Pan-Asianists like Tōyama Mitsuru (1855–1944), influenced their pro-Japanese- and pro-modernization-oriented arguments.37 The events of 1882 eventually “turned frustration into despair and desperation,”38 such that Kim Ok-gyun and his followers began to think a coup was the only possible solution for Korea. The Gapsin Coup of 1884 was the consequence of these thoughts, and the progressives, who were supported by Japanese troops, seized control of

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4.2 Korea and Japanese Imperialism

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34 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 19.
36 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 21.
37 Ōshima Tōto, Tōyama-ō no doko ga erai ka, in: Fujimoto Hisanori (Ed.): Tōyama seishin Tokyo 1940, pp. 82–110.
38 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 21.
the government in Seoul. The king was kidnapped and some prominent conserva-
atives murdered, but Kim and his men lacked popular support for their act, es-
pecially since their coup was publicly perceived as a Japanese plot against
Korean independence. The Gapsin Coup failed, and not only did it fail to achieve
a true change, but it also “besmirched the image of reform in the eyes of officials
and the public alike.”

Japanese right-wing forces had hoped that similar events
would stimulate a crisis in Korea and a war with China, which is why they sent
small sabotage units to the peninsula to stir up trouble, but the war between
the Middle Kingdom and Japan would not break out until 1894 when a Donghak
rebellion shook Korea and forced the monarchy to ask for China’s help, an act
that allowed Japan to formulate a reason to go to war. During the conflict, how-
ever, the Japanese military and other extremists used the opportunity to assassi-
nate Empress Myeongseong, and Kojong had to escape to the Russian legation.
While China was defeated in 1895, Russia had expressed its ambitions not only
in the Triple Intervention against Japan but also in its support of Kojong, who
tried to maneuver between the interests of the two great powers.

After the Sino-Japanese War, Kojong launched the Gwangmu Reform (1897–
1904), and its agenda – “old foundation, new participation” (kubon sinch’am) –
was supposed to bring about reforms without antagonizing the traditionalists too
much.

However, it was not only the war between China and Japan that had further
weakened Korea, which was already in turmoil before. The Donghak movement
had also demanded more equality and was directed toward the strictly hierarchical
and patriarchal family structures that existed in the country. While the authori-
ties had been able to repress the movement in the 1860s, in the 1890s, it reappe-
red stronger than before because economic changes had impoverished many
peasants in the previous decades. This is why the Donghak movement, although it
was based on religious considerations and motivations, also had a social compo-
nent that made it attractive to many Koreans at the end of the 19th century. Its
leaders had created it as a “syncretic religion combining Confucianism, Buddhism,
Taoism, and practices of lower-class popular religion, and they initially demanded reforms while backing the traditional role of the monarchy. When the Donghak movement reappeared in the 1890s, it was far more dangerous to Kjong, which is why he believed he had no other choice than to ask for help from abroad, especially since the demands of the movement were quite revolutionary with regard to the scale of the reforms requested. The issues that needed to be addressed, according to the followers of the movement, were “local governmental corruption, yangban privileges, rural poverty, and the growing foreign presence in Korea.” It was the impoverished peasants who flocked to the banners of the movement and made it powerful enough to threaten the political order, which, by asking for foreign help, could neither defend itself against the decline nor prevent Japanese expansionist ambitions from gaining ground on the Korean Peninsula.

There were, of course, also nationalist elements within the Donghak movement, as its name and the reference to the East emphasize. Strong anti-foreign sentiments moved the rural population as much as the increasing poverty they had been suffering from since the opening of Korea in 1876. Such sentiments would continue in the early 20th century, especially when the Righteous Army movements (uibyŏng, 1905, 1907–11) instrumentalized them against the Japanese. Japan had nevertheless taken advantage of the turmoil and used the Sino-Japanese War to claim special rights in Korea while the prestige of the monarchy further declined.

Regardless of these developments, young reform-oriented intellectuals and progressive officials took the initiative to stimulate further reforms in Korea. In 1896, they founded the Independence Club (Tongnip hyŏphoe), which was led by Seo Jae-pil (1864–1951, a.k.a. Philip Jaisohn), a young medical student who had previously been exiled in the United States. While the club was reform-oriented, it was also nationalist in nature and initiated the demand to reform Korea as an empire and make the king its emperor so as to, in a way, gain independence from China and increase the country’s status at the same time.

43 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 23.
44 Ibid.
Furthermore, the club published *The Independent (Tongnip sinmun)*, which is “recognized as Korea’s first vernacular (Han’gŭl script) newspaper and the first to include a section written in English.”49 The publication was therefore observed with suspicion by conservatives, especially since “classical Chinese had continued as the official court written language as well as the literary language of the yangban,” and the use of han’gŭl was “controversial, opposed by conservative officials as vulgar and demeaning.”50 Furthermore, the Independence Club and the ideas expressed in *The Independent* were considered to be too radical, even if the members of the club presented themselves as Korean patriots. One could not support the monarchy and debate its policies at the same time. This was unheard of and caused a lot of criticism of and problems for the Independence Club.51

Regardless of these issues, the time was ripe for change, and more and more voices began to critically debate the future of Korea. The influx of Western knowledge had stimulated political debates, and study societies opened new spaces for debate about the ideas imported from the West. *The Independent*, regardless of the reactions the publication received from within official circles, paved the way for new journals that allowed young intellectuals to publicly debate their views and ideas while also enabling a growing number of readers to read about them and thereby become part of a wider and more diverse national print culture.

*The Capital Daily (Hwangsong sinmun)*, published in a mix of Korean and Chinese, was one of the later successful publication projects between 1898 and the annexation in 1910, although it reached mainly upper- and middle-class intellectuals with its articles about reform ideas. The editorial board had prominent intellectuals as members, including the historian Chang Chi-yŏn (1864–1921) and the anarchist and historian Shin Chae-ho (1880–1936).52 The “first truly mass publication in Korea,”53 however, was the *Korea Daily News (Taehan maeil sinbo)*, which was published in higher numbers, distributed all over the country, and thereby “shared a large role in enlightening the people and inspiring a patriotic fervor.”54

In addition to these daily newspapers, “[s]mall specialized magazines augmented

51 Ibid.
53 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 29.
54 Chai-Shin Yu, A New History of Korean Civilization, Bloomington, IN 2012, p. 211.
the growth of the Korean press after 1900. These magazines focused on discussions of Western thought, translations of Western classical literature and political philosophy, and treatises on educational reform. Journals were published by political societies, like the Korea Self-Strengthening Society (Taehan cha’gan-ghoe) and other academic societies with a broad variety of topics. These publications helped to strengthen Korean nationalism as well, as they increased the existence of a sense of national belonging and created what Benedict Anderson named an “imagined community.” The new publications and the growing print capitalism helped to link intellectuals across the country, and the “growing nationalist intelligentsia” would spread new ideas about the Korean nation in their spheres of influence. There were, of course, also debates about the right course for reforms. While the younger intellectuals often preferred a radical break with the past and traditions, more moderate voices argued on behalf of a symbiosis of Korean traditions and Western knowledge, something that was quite similar to the debates in China and Japan in the last decades of the 19th century.

A break with the past, however, could be observed in Korea with regard to education, since private schools boomed after 1900 and former students who returned from their study stays abroad, especially from Japan, opened such schools and taught according to radically different curricula. The intellectual Park Eun-sik (1859–1925), who would also write a history of the March First Movement, “stressed the importance of instilling in students a new sense of cultural and social responsibility as a prerequisite to creating new citizens (sin-min). The new citizens would have an appreciation of science as well as a deep understanding of the Korean cultural and historical experience. It was important to galvanize identification with the nation or the fruits of the new education would be wasted.” Like in every other national context, the Koreans had to come to terms with regard to their own idea of a nation, and multiple positions and thoughts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were struggling to define what was considered the ideal nation for Korea. It is almost tragic that this debate was being led while the Japanese continued to erode the existence of the Korean state, and thus the independent nation-state could not be created for another three and a half decades. The struggle between the nationalist

55 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 28. Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 29.
56 The journal was called Taehan Chaganghoe wŏlbo.
58 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 29.
59 Park Eun-sik, Han’guk tongnip undong chi hyŏlsa, Shanghai 1920.
60 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 30.
modernizers and reformers on the one hand and the traditionalist and conservative elites on the other eventually weakened the Korean position as it prevented unity. Some intellectuals cited Japan as a successful model of a combination of Western knowledge and Asian traditions, but although Western ideas were sometimes presented as being close to Confucian ideals, they were not convincing enough to create a powerful symbiosis that could attract the approval of the wider public. Ultimately, there was maybe just not enough time to find an answer, and Japan was the winner in this situation.

With its victory against Russia in 1905, and although the military victories on the battlefields and on the seas were not turned into a diplomatic victory during the peace negotiations in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Japan was able to establish a kind of protectorate in Korea, and it used its influence to force Kojong to abdicate in 1907. It was the Japanese victory that “ultimately determined the fate of the dynasty,” and the Korean state “became a Japanese diplomatic dependency with no rights of self-representation in the world system.” With its international alliances and diplomatic agreements, such as the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902) or the Taft-Katsura Agreement (1905), Japan had secured its uncontested influence on the Korean Peninsula, and, after 1905, the Japanese resident-general would secure particular influence on the country’s politics. Kojong’s protest against his forced abdication at the international court in The Hague did not result in any anti-Japanese protest or action from the international community, and when his son was installed as the new emperor in Seoul, it was the Japanese colonial authorities that used the

64 Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey, p. 12.
boy to further intensify their control within Korea. In addition, Tokyo could also rely on pro-Japanese organizations like the *Iljinhoe* (Progress Party) that supported the idea of a “unification” with Japan.68 Arguments were made on behalf of Japanese interventions with regard to the idea of necessary reforms in Korea, which is why the historical developments thereby further discredited the radical reform movement, as reforms in general came to be identified with Japanese aggression.

However, there was also resistance against the increasing Japanese influence and their tightened political grip on the monarchy and government in Seoul. Intellectuals would use the new print media to speak out against Japanese expansionism, and the above-mentioned Righteous Armies, i.e. small guerrilla bands, were formed to fight against the Japanese police and military forces that had been stationed in the country. Between 1907 and 1911, the Japanese Army and the police exerted some amount of effort to deal with these nationalist elements in Korea, but the final annexation of the country could not be prevented.69 This, however, does not mean that other forms of resistance against the developments in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War did not exist. The *Korea Daily News*, whose non-Korean editor Ernest Bethell (1872–1909)70 could not be censored so easily by the Japanese authorities, could express criticism, at least for some years, before new publication laws prevented this critical voice against Japan from continuing its work.71 However, with the steady intensification of Japanese rule in Korea, the nationalist reform movement went through a transformation, and in 1910, it turned into an independence movement directed against Japan. The latter’s control over the peninsula was nevertheless made possible because there were also forces at work in Korea that collaborated with the Japanese authorities. The old elites, namely the royal and *yangban* families, were bought by stipends, and other collaborators received privileges or other forms of advantages within the new political order, which was increasingly centralized and occupied by representatives of the Japanese colonial government. When Resident-General Itō Hirobumi (1841–1909) was assassinated by a Korean nationalist, the Japanese finally had a suitable reason to formalize their colonial rule, and they annexed the country to become part of the Japanese Empire. On 22 August 1910, Japanese Resident-General Terauchi

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69 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 38.
71 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 38.
Masatake (1852–1919) and the Korean Prime Minister Yi Wan-yong (1858–1926) signed the official Treaty of Annexation, which “further stipulated that the Japanese government assumed control of Korea’s administration.”

At the same time, Koreans were turned into Japanese citizens, and although many left the country to escape Japanese rule, they would indirectly become agents of Japanese imperialism when the expansionists in Tokyo demanded that the borders be pushed into regions where Koreans — who, after 1910, were Japanese citizens — were living. The American press at that time did not protest a lot but rather considered this step quite natural, especially since the Treaty of Portsmouth a couple of years earlier seemed to have prepared for precisely such a step. Considering the already-mentioned agreements with Western powers, Japan was allegedly acting within the limits of its internationally accepted capacity. The hope for foreign support was useless, as Kim Sik-hun, a Korean diplomat who was quite familiar with American politics due to his service in Washington, DC, remarked in an interview with the New York Times: “Everywhere, he says, there is a patriotic uprising burning fiercely despite frequent defeat of the Koreans by the better-equipped Japanese soldiers, and kept aflame by the hope that in the near future Japan will find herself with a more powerful enemy on her hands, when Korea can regain her 4,243-year-old independence and throw off the yoke of annexation.” Since nobody would interfere with Japanese imperialism in 1910, the outlook for Korea was rather hopeless. The country was also supposed to be Japanized according to an assimilation program, which was announced soon after the annexation was formalized. Korea, as mentioned earlier, was not only supposed to act as a colony for exploitation but was also to be transformed into an important part of the Japanese Empire. Terauchi Masatake, who acted as the country’s first governor-general after the annexation process had been formalized, therefore...

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72 The treaty’s text can be found at https://international.ucla.edu/institute/article/18447. Accessed My 30, 2022.
76 Cited in ibid., p. 14.
77 Kleiner, Korea, p. 30.
“noted the close proximity, shared culture, and ethnic origins shared by Japan and Korea as proof of the possibility of eventual assimilation.”

The newly appointed governor-general was supposed to be assisted in his work, and for this purpose, “[s]ix central offices which functioned like ministries were established: for General, Home, Financial, Agricultural, Commercial and Industrial as well as Judicial Affairs.” With the annexation, the number of Japanese settlers and officials in Korea grew as well (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Number of Japanese living in Korea.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Japanese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>171,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>347,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>650,100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the same time, the number of policemen increased as well (Table 4.2), especially since the police force was turned into the “main instrument of Japanese control in Korea.”

Table 4.2: Number of policemen in colonial Korea.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Policemen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>7,712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>14,358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>20,771</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>20,647</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regardless of the strict and close control of life in colonial Korea, the resistance against Japanese rule on the peninsula did not totally vanish. However, it was at the end of the First World War when massive resistance erupted and thereby created a real stress test for the Japanese authorities in the colony. How the latter tried to assimilate the Korean population in the years between 1910 and the First World War will now be taken into closer consideration.

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78 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 40.
79 Kleiner, Korea, p. 30.
80 Ibid., p. 31.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid. and Chung-Shin Park, Protestantism and Politics in Korea, Seattle, WA 2003, p. 129.
4.3 Colonial Korea until the First World War

The first decade after the annexation by Japan is usually referred to as the “dark period,” in which the Korean population, its traditions, its culture, and their national sense of being an independent people were suppressed by Japanese force. Yong-Chool Ha has emphasized that it is not easy to generalize the colonial experience of the Korean people, which is why he remarked that “in understanding colonial society it is essential to see the inherent contradictions created by the conflicting needs of colonial rule and the intersectoral imbalance or disequilibrium arbitrarily imposed by colonial control.” Ha further stressed that “essential elements of Japanese colonialism in Korea include foreign dominance, in which the domestic and numerical majority is controlled by a foreign and numerical minority with the intent of economic and strategic exploitation based on an overwhelming disparity in coercive force.” According to Ha’s further elaboration, the Japanese tried to fully control the “Colonial Superstructural Space,” which is to be understood as “the space in which the colonial authority attempts, within the inevitable constraints of material possibility, to establish its hegemony over the colonized and to inaugurate institutional, societal, and ideological arrangements to implement and maintain such hegemony.” A centralized and omnipotent bureaucracy was one aspect of this attempt, while the cultural assimilation of the Korean people, who had to speak Japanese, worship the emperor, and give up their own national identity, was a demanded consequence. In this regard, Japan was simply “aggressive, colonizing, and rapacious” when satisfying its own cravings for expansion at the expense of its East Asian neighbors.

In 1910, the power struggle for Korea was decided when Japan won against its competitors, i.e. China and Russia. Due to its military victories in 1895 and 1905, Japan had secured its power on the peninsula and could now exert it without any foreign intervention. The relationship between the two countries

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83 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 42.
85 Ibid., p. 43.
86 Ibid., p. 47.
was consequently marked by a sense of Japanese entitlement regarding the inclusion of the Korean territory in its future Asian Empire. Although generalizing the economic developments in Korea is not recommended, in many ways, “Japan had a one-way economic relationship with Korea and the utilization of human and nonhuman resources was designed for the purpose of Japanese national strategy. Any economic relationships between Korea and Japan were focused on Japanese policy.”\(^{89}\) The colonial government and the authorities that represented it were therefore acting in Seoul on behalf of orders that were supposed to serve Tokyo more than the Korean population.\(^{90}\) Regardless of these imperialist realities, the Japanese would argue that their actions were for the greater good of Korea. Considering these issues, it is tragic that the Korean attempts to modernize the country in the late 19th century failed, as this failure was also responsible for the internal weakness that made the aggressive moves of the Japanese possible. After 1910, however, the lives of the Korean people would be tremendously transformed, yet this transformation would no longer follow a genuine Korean interest.

The colonial government was probably the most intense and thorough form of foreign penetration in the long and brutal history of colonialism and imperialist expansion, as every angle of the Korean society was penetrated by the new ruling power. Michael E. Robinson highlighted in this regard that, “[n]ot content with simple compliance, the colonial state not only dominated Korea following the usual paternalistic logic of colonialists, but they also believed they could actually ‘assimilate’ Koreans culturally.”\(^{91}\) Using their experience from Taiwan,\(^{92}\) the Japanese colonizers had a clear agenda to follow, and the authorities also “mobilized archeology, ethnography, and historical studies to justify their rule in Korea as a matter of lifting up a wayward sibling culture and returning it to its proper course as part of the destiny of the Yamato race.”\(^{93}\) As “the first steward of the state-building process as governor general,”\(^{94}\) Terauchi was in a powerful position and willing to do everything necessary to fulfill the ambitions of Imperial Japan and the people that represented it. Appointed from

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\(^{89}\) Kwak and Lee, Conditions, p. 76.  
\(^{90}\) Kim, A History of Korea, p. 322.  
\(^{91}\) Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey, p. 36.  
\(^{93}\) Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey, p. 36.  
\(^{94}\) Ibid., p. 37.
high army ranks – only Saitō Makoto (1858–1936), who served in this position between 1919 and 1927 as well as between 1929 and 1931, was an admiral in the Japanese navy before –, the governor-general was supposed to act under the supervision of the Diet, the Home Ministry, and the Ministry of Colonial Affairs, although the governor-general reported directly to the emperor and could thereby circumvent any form of political control.95 The governor-general had a powerful position beyond his political might because he ruled over more than 20 million subjects, could collect and control taxes, was the commander of the Japanese Army and police in Korea, and directed the actions of the thousands of bureaucrats who kept the machinery of colonial control running.

After the annexation, the main task was to keep the peninsula pacified and to avoid the eruption of any nationalist or anti-Japanese protests. Once the guerilla bands of the Righteous Army were suppressed and the former elites sufficiently heavily bribed, the colonial government could rule relatively uncontested. Due to “a blatantly fabricated plot to assassinate the governor general in 1911,”96 the Japanese arrested around 700 Koreans, though only around 100 were eventually prosecuted, and just five were sentenced to spend 5–10 years in prison. This was “the first major political show trial in the colony” and highlighted how easy it was to bring people to trial. The police in Korea also acted relatively brutally, and, together with a “rigid, highly intrusive administrative colonialism,”97 they turned the life of the common people into one marked by agony and fear. The police and other representatives of the colonial government, as Robinson points out,

counted everything and created a myriad of regulations governing daily life from slaughtering a worn-out draft animal to the placement of a family grave; they established new land and family registers, health regulations, detailed sanitation procedures in the reorganized city administrations, fishery regulations, rules governing water rights and irrigation ditches, standard operating procedures for periodic markets, and licenses and permission forms for just about everything else. The gendarmerie – swords dangling from the men’s uniforms as symbols of their authority – was given summary powers to enforce the regulations.98

At the same time, the legal regulations and punishments for Koreans and Japanese who lived in Korea were different, e.g. with regard to whipping, which was only used as a punishment for the former group. Public resistance was no longer possible, and organizations like the New People’s Association (Sinminhoe), which was organized by the intellectuals and social activists Shin Chae-

95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., p. 38.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
ho, An Chang-ho (1878–1938), Park Eun-sik, and Lim Chi-jung (1880–1932), had to go into hiding and continue their activities in secret. It was through educational means in particular that the association members tried to forge new nationalist leaders for the future struggle against the Japanese, but their work was not easy in the colonial environment. In the years after 1910, more and more Koreans were consequently imprisoned by the Japanese authorities because the latter feared a spread of Korean nationalism and anti-Japanese sentiments across the peninsula (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3: The number of imprisoned Koreans in the period 1911–1916.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Imprisoned Koreans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>16,807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>19,494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>21,846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>24,434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>27,255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>32,836</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since, during the “dark period,” Koreans were not allowed to join any political organization or spend time engaged in activities that could be interpreted politically, religious institutions and churches, e.g. the Protestant Church, whose missionaries would also link Korea to the outside world during the First World War, became important spaces for political activism. Because the Japanese had divided the colony into 13 provinces and a large number of colonial bureaucrats and officers administered them locally, divided into cities and counties, there were not many alternatives left for the Korean population to organize or exchange anti-Japanese thoughts. To avoid any threatening resistance, the Japanese decision-makers also sent additional troops to the colony over the years to tighten their grip there. It is therefore not surprising that Koreans abroad, in the United States but also in Japan, would play an important role in

100 Park, Protestantism, p. 130.
102 Kim, A History of Korea, p. 322.
the spread of nationalist ideas and the organization of Korean resistance, which in a way culminated in March 1919.\footnote{103}

The economic structure of Korea was also adjusted to fit the Japanese demands.\footnote{104} To see how the Japanese changed the structures within the country, it is important to take a short look at the land allotment schemes that existed before the opening of Korea and its annexation by Japan. It has been assumed that, in the 17th and 18th centuries, “about 10% of the landholders owned 40% to 50% of the registered land, while middle or poor peasants comprising about 60% of the rural population controlled only about 10% to 20%.”\footnote{105} The larger landowners were, of course, yangban, whose social status was closely linked to their possessions. While per capita landholding during the later years of the Chosŏn dynasty had declined, peasants avoided poverty through “crop specialization, technological innovation, and labor intensification.”\footnote{106} The opening of Korea changed this situation, as export markets were now dictating domestic demands, and rice and beans became the dominant crops in Korean fields, as they “constituted more than 60% of total exports in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”\footnote{107} Before 1905, Japanese economic interests had already influenced the Korean agricultural setting considerably,\footnote{108} but after 1900, and especially after 1910, the colonial interests of Japan would tremendously alter the existent land tenure structures and decrease the percentage of land that was actually owned by Koreans.

The Japanese authorities had already tried to take possession of Korean lands before the official annexation but met fierce resistance. With the official “integration” of Korea into the Japanese Empire, however, the governor-general simply confiscated large parts of public land and farmland (around 65,000 acres) as well as forests (around 45,000 acres).\footnote{109} Consequently, the colonial annexation was accompanied by a “real land grab”\footnote{110} since the Japanese also took control of the Royal Household’s land possessions. Many of the new lands were handed over to “Korean investors and private land companies such as the

\footnotetext[104]{Kim, A History of Korea, p. 324.}
\footnotetext[105]{Gi-Wook Shin, Peasant Protest and Social Change in Colonial Korea, Seattle, WA 1996, p. 22.}
\footnotetext[106]{Ibid., p. 25. Cotton, tobacco, silk, ginseng and other commercial crops were grown as a consequence.}
\footnotetext[107]{Ibid., p. 28.}
\footnotetext[109]{Kim, A History of Korea, p. 324.}
\footnotetext[110]{Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey, p. 40.}
Fuji Land Company or the huge semigovernmental Oriental Development Company.111 From its start, the Japanese colonial policy was consequently determined by the economic interests of Japanese investment companies as well. The loss of large parts of public land, the increased population, and volatile rice prices harshened the lives of many Korean peasants in the following years, such that, “[b]y the end of the colonial period, tenancy rates approached 80 percent in the densely populated and most productive rice-growing areas of the Cholla provinces in the southwest. And many peasants chose to leave the land altogether, ending up in the cities in search of jobs.”112 The new system of land possession and capitalist-oriented agriculture provided numerous advantages for landowners, which is why the yangban naturally supported, or at least did not resist, the Japanese measures. The farmers’ voices were simply not heard, and the yangban maintained their position as the main landowning class in the new colonial order.113

With their control of the forests, mines, and fisheries established, the Japanese could also begin to effectively exploit Korea’s resources, and they would soon also have tight control over the industrial sector and finances on the peninsula. The forests were of particular interest, which is why in May 1918, according to a new law, all forest owners had to register their possessions, and all former forest lands that had been owned by the Korean state were officially seized and became the property of the governor-general.114 Eventually, the colonial authorities took over more than 50% of the forests and farmland and thereby physically controlled the country.115 When Japanese companies lumbered large quantities of wood in the areas around the Yalu and Tumen rivers in the north of the country, the profits from the forests went to these companies as well.116 Similar developments can be observed with regard to the exploitation of the vast Korean fishing grounds. In 1912, “the vast fishing grounds, held formerly by the Chosŏn royal household and private Koreans, were placed under the administration of the Government-General. The colonial government encouraged Japanese fishermen to immigrate to Korea.”117 With the more sophisticated Japanese fishing

111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
113 Kim, A History of Korea, p. 325.
114 Ibid., p. 326.
115 For a detailed study of Japan’s policies regarding the Korean forests see David Fedman, Seeds of Control. Japan’s Empire of Forestry in Colonial Korea, Seattle, WA 2020.
116 The Japanese interest in the forests in the northern peninsula was not new. See United States Bureau of Manufactures (Ed.), Monthly Consular and Trade Reports 86, Washington, D.C. 1908, pp. 91–92.
117 Kim, A History of Korea, p. 326.
techniques, the number of fish that could be taken out of Korean waters increased tremendously, but the fishing grounds were systematically overfished, and the Japanese colonial policy thereby also harmed the ecosystem within the borders of the former Korean waters.

The mineral resources in the north of Korea were similarly exploited by Japanese mining companies, but these acts were legalized by a mining ordinance in December 1915. The profits went to Japanese zaibatsu like Mitsui, which had almost unlimited access to Korean ores.\textsuperscript{118} Although attempts to relativize the economic gains colonialism created for Japan have been made, it can be said without any doubt that the Korean colony was exploited in numerous ways for the sake of Japanese prosperity in the first half of the 20th century.\textsuperscript{119} The finance sector was also regulated by a new Company Law (1910), and a close surveillance of the banks – including the Bank of Chōsen, which was supposed to become the colony’s central banking institution, and the Chōsen Industrial Bank – secured the financing of projects related to the colony’s infrastructure, like building railways, as well as ventures that would stimulate further Japanese expansion toward the north, especially in Manchuria.\textsuperscript{120}

As this short survey has already shown, “[v]irtually all industries were monopolized either by Japanese-based corporations or by Japanese corporations in Korea.”\textsuperscript{121} and access to natural resources and financial transactions was tightly controlled and increasingly limited for Koreans, whose enterprises were closely monitored by the Japanese colonial authorities as well. Without the approval of the latter, a new company could not be founded, and Korean economic activities were thereby systematically limited and even purposefully underdeveloped. Considering underdevelopment an essential aspect of colonial rule, Japan’s hold over Korea was consequently similar to those of Western

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} Kim, A History of Korea, p. 326.
imperialist powers in their respective colonies.\textsuperscript{122} It is therefore hardly surprising that more than 90% of all invested capital in Korea was in Japanese hands, which is why arguments setting out the positive impact of Japanese colonialism on Korea’s development – e.g. the increase of railroad lines from 677 miles in 1911 to 1,777 miles in 1930 – often seem to be quite absurd and only serve to relativize the abuse of power to exploit the peninsula for the sake of Japanese imperialism and the building of an East Asian empire.\textsuperscript{123} The railways in particular served the interest of the colonial government, as they 1) linked the southern ports with the northern production and mining sites and 2) allowed troop transports that would be essential for further Japanese expansion toward the north.\textsuperscript{124}

However, there was not only an economic side to Japanese colonialism in Korea. “After the annexation of Korea, the Japanese were ever sensitive to the education of the Koreans”\textsuperscript{125} to assimilate the Korean population as well as possible. Robinson clearly emphasized the Japanese aims in this regard when he stated that “[f]rom the beginning of their colonial rule, the Japanese had intended that Korea would not be absorbed just politically by the empire but that it would also be culturally assimilated (dōka), to become one with Japan in all respects.”\textsuperscript{126} To secure “one voice” with regard to the intellectual and educational efforts aimed at the Korean population, the Japanese authorities limited the accessibility of information by issuing a Newspaper Law and a Publication Law in 1907 and 1909, respectively. Once the annexation was completed, access to any kind of unfiltered information became more and more restricted, and, as mentioned before, religious organizations and meetings remained the only space for Koreans’ political activism. The colonial government also built large Shintō shrines in Korean cities to prepare for the locals’ assimilation on this level as well, although this policy did not go uncontested. The cultural assimilation policy was also expressed by architectural changes when the former capital of the Korean dynasty was turned into a modern city space that was supposed to echo Japanese achievements.\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{123} Kim, A History of Korea, p. 327.
\textsuperscript{124} Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{125} Kim, A History of Korea, p. 328.
\textsuperscript{126} Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{127} Henry, Assimilating Seoul, pp. 1 and 29.
Step by step, the intention was to reinterpret Korean national history such that it would fit better with the Japanese narratives of unity and pan-Asian solidarity, although the latter were exclusively understood according to their pro-Japanese interpretation. Between 1932 and 1937, a multi-volume *History of Korea (Chōsenshi)* was published, and, according to Robinson, it “rewrote the entire history of the peninsula into an elaborate justification of colonial rule.” Korean historians and intellectuals tried to counter such reinterpretations, but they often did not have the means or the access to the popular audiences to actively resist Japan’s attempt to rewrite Korea’s past in the name of its future assimilation. For the colonial administration, the task was to foster the acceptance of the idea that the Japanese policy in Korea was for the greater good of its people. According to their narrative, “[a]n incompetent Korean government had stifled Korean potential,” but now, “[p]lacing the people under a benevolent government would allow them to realize their potential.” Regardless of such assumptions, there were also debates about the proper assimilation policies and the overall potential for such a task to be successful. The Japanese ethnohistorian Kita Sadakichi (1871–1939), who was tied to the Ministry of Education, compared the Koreans to the Ainu and argued that “assimilation was appropriate because it represented a return to the historical, and natural, relationship that the two peoples once shared.”

While those in favor of a fast assimilation process were particularly fond of their position and had high hopes after 1910, as this task could now be taken into full consideration by the colonial authorities, there were also those who cautioned against moving too fast, warning that “[d]espite the apparent ease that Japanese imagined in the people’s assimilation, Koreans would first have to demonstrate their ability to rise to Japanese standards before they could be accepted into their inner circles.” After the Second World War, the historian Hatada Takashi (1908–1994) remarked in relation to Japan’s assimilation attempts that

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128 Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey, p. 44.
133 Ibid., 85.
Despite the rhetoric of Korean-Japanese similarity provided by participants in the debate over assimilation policy, those painting images of Koreans portrayed the people in terms only slightly more encouraging than those that predated annexation. Koreans remained an underdeveloped people trapped in the distant past, a spiritless people in desperate need of enlightened government to awaken them to present reality. While some saw potential in the Korean people, the views of difference in others hardened as they observed one of the results of annexation: Japanese and Koreans residing in closer proximity.\(^{134}\)

Some Japanese also had doubts about Koreans’ rapid assimilation, since they were considered to be too different for immediate success in this regard. The politician Arakawa Gorō (1865–1944) had warned in 1906 that although Koreans “all look just like the Japanese,” they would not match the intellectual level of their Japanese neighbors.\(^{135}\)

The Japanese education policy in colonial Korea was consequently oriented toward achieving an assimilation in the future, and “Japanese reformers and educators thus sought to reorganize Korean education around a new pedagogy founded on moral instruction and disciplinary techniques”\(^{136}\) that addressed the demands and regulations of Imperial Ordinance No. 229 of August 1911. Ter-auchi requested the schools in Korea to be classified according to three levels or categories, namely futsū (common), jitsugyō (industrial), and senmon (specialized).\(^{137}\) Boys and girls would spend four years in primary education and four and three years, respectively, in a secondary educational institution after that. Koreans and Japanese were also separated within the schools, and only the latter could also send their children to Japan to get schooled there. In 1911, school textbooks were sanctioned and needed to be pre-approved by the colonial government to ensure the accuracy of the content that was being taught. The educational experiences of many Korean children and youths were consequently tremendously impacted by the colonial reality: “Japanese language study was compulsory in all accredited schools, and the Korean secondary system stressed vocational and technical education. The only higher liberal arts education available to Koreans was in private religious or secular colleges; in short, opportunities for Koreans in Korea to study law, medicine, engineering, and the humanities remained very limited.”\(^{138}\) Only a few Korean students

\(^{134}\) Cited in ibid., p. 89. Also see Takashi Hatada, Nihon to chōsen, Tokyo 1965.

\(^{135}\) Cited in ibid., p. 92.


\(^{137}\) Yoo, The Politics of Gender, p. 61.

\(^{138}\) Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey, p. 45.
could afford to enroll in higher education institutions in Japan or other foreign countries, although the Korean independence movement would later especially rely on these students who had been part of the national diaspora abroad.

The reasons to leave Korea were numerous, but white-collar professions in particular were hardly accessible for Koreans because the financial sector, trading companies, public schools, railways, and the colonial bureaucracy were mostly dominated by Japanese or at least pro-Japanese personnel. In addition, a secondary degree of Japanese provenance was often necessary to have the possibility to work in one of these jobs. The small Korean elite was consequently kept that way through educational means.\(^{139}\) One could consequently argue that the nationalist and anti-Japanese eruption of 1919 was related to increasing social tension, as especially a younger and probably more radical generation of Koreans realized that the colonial order would not grant them similar access to a secure and prosperous future. Similarly to in China, the hopes for change in the aftermath of the First World War would consequently generate what nationalist forces perceived as a window of opportunity to loosen the yoke of Japanese colonialism and the tight control of almost every aspect that had determined life in Korean society since 1910. In Korea itself, it was, as mentioned before, churches and religious organizations that allowed gatherings and discussions in a relatively secure space that the Japanese authorities could not control. The “Protestant church came to serve as a place for solace, a political forum, a communication network, and an organizational base for Korean nationalist activities,”\(^{140}\) a fact that was also related to the Christian missionary history in Korea, where many schools for girls and women had been opened by foreign missionaries since the late 1880s.\(^{141}\) In the colonial era, the Protestant Church’s influence was quite important, as Chung-shin Park highlights:

The Protestant church’s organizational potential at the time was useful for Korean nationalists, but dangerous for the colonial government. The church contained thousands of pastors and church workers who led some 200,000 adherents and more than 2,000 churches in the peninsula. There were almost one thousand church-affiliated schools, and Protestants published their own newspapers and periodicals. These organizations were arranged in a hierarchy, and thus were connected closely in terms of organization and church administration. The Protestant church provided a nationwide communication

\(^{139}\) Ibid., p. 46.

\(^{140}\) Park, Protestantism and Politics, p. 117.

According to Ch’oe Myŏngsik, a political activist at the time, Korean patriotic activities indeed proceeded in and through churches, and the Protestant church was the best meeting place and political forum for nationalist activities. It is natural that a Korean nationalist leadership was formed in this religious community.\textsuperscript{142}

Church leaders had also been active in the \textit{Sinminhoe}, a connection that created close ties between church and nationalist activism even before the colonial period officially began in 1910. The \textit{Sinminhoe}’s members secretly met at the Sandong Church in Seoul, and under Japanese colonial rule, church meetings turned out to become camouflaged resistance activities for those nationalists who had to act without being recognized by the Japanese colonial authorities as political radicals. In addition to such forms of church support, missionaries also intervened by making their own comments on the colonial order when they “interpreted the Scripture deliberately to reflect the current political situation. The church taught that the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt could be likened to the need for Koreans to free themselves from Japan. This was an instance of political language in the guise of religious teaching.”\textsuperscript{143} Regardless of these numerous forms of resistance related to Korean church organizations, it was first and foremost the nationalists abroad who tried to draw attention to the situation within colonial Korea, especially at the end of the First World War.

There were many Korean nationalists who were either forced to leave the Korean peninsula or proactively chose to do so in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War and, in particular, from 1910. This decision was also influenced by the absence of organizational structures and activities that could be undertaken there. The Japanese had control of the press, prohibited political organizations, and anyone who acted suspiciously was probably soon to be surveilled by the police. Therefore, as Robinson worded it, “the situation within Korea appeared hopeless”\textsuperscript{144} to many political activists, who instead chose to continue their activities in exile in Manchuria, Shanghai, or Vladivostok. In the Manchurian context, they could use their access to land in the region to support the cause of the resistance economically, and military bases could even be erected there. The most prominent example of such activities is probably the Military School of the New Rising (\textit{Sinhŭng mugwan hakkyo}), where, in the late 1910s, Korean independence fighters would be trained. Similar training facilities were established on Russian soil during the First World War.\textsuperscript{145}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{142} Park, Protestantism and Politics, p. 120.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Ibid., p. 131.
\item \textsuperscript{144} Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 41.
\item \textsuperscript{145} Kim, A History of Korea, p. 329.
\end{itemize}
Other Korean nationalists organized themselves in Shanghai, where a Mutual Assistance Society (Tongjesa) was founded in 1912. In 1919, the New Korea Youth Corps (Sinhan ch’ôngnyǒndan) was established, and Kim Kyu-sik (1881–1950) chose to travel to Paris to attend the peace conference there and to make the voices of Korea heard. Others like Syngman Rhee (1875–1965), who would become the first president of South Korea in 1948, were active in the United States. Rhee founded the Korean National Association in 1909 in Hawai‘i, and, a year later, he received a doctoral degree in political science from Princeton University after having studied at George Washington University and Harvard University. His close ties to the intellectual and politically influential circles of the United States helped him to publicize the situation of the Korean people, and he hoped that diplomatic means would eventually help to regain Korea’s independence. Regardless of his being abroad, Rhee was elected as the first president of the Korean Provisional Government, which was announced in Shanghai in April 1919. In August of the same year, he created the Korean Commission in Washington, DC, an organization that was supposed to lobby for Korea’s independence. Although it was not successful with regard to this aim, Rhee became probably the most well-known Korean abroad, and his popularity would play an important role as South Korea’s president after the end of the Second World War.

While Rhee had argued for a diplomatic solution, others like Park Yong-man (1881–1928) demanded a violent uprising against Japanese rule, and, like others in Manchuria or Russia, he established a military training school in Hawai‘i. There, the Korean activists were split into two camps, one supporting Rhee, one supporting Park. However, these were not the only alternatives: An Chang-ho (1878–1938) founded the Society for the Fostering of Educational Activities (Hŭngsadan) in San Francisco in 1913 because he believed that the strengthening of a particularly Korean education would help spark national sentiments and activate the necessary powers for an anti-Japanese liberation. While Korean expatriates were united by their hope to end the colonial rule of Japan in their home country, they did not share the same ideas about the

means and methods to achieve it. That the influence of those political activ-
ists who worked outside of Korea between 1910 and 1919 should not be taken
lightly is obvious when one considers that there were Korean immigrants to the
United States who returned to their home country in 1919 to help to organize
the March First Movement because they wanted to support the national struggle
against Japan. That even people who had lived abroad for years were willing
and eager to return to Korea to participate in the demonstrations for Korean in-
dependence was also related to the fact that, almost ten years after the annex-
ation by Japan, the First World War and the post-war quest for a new political
order that was supposed to determine a better and more peaceful future had
created an opportunity many Koreans considered suitable to reclaim what had
been taken from them due to Japan’s expansion since the end of the Russo-

4.4 The First World War and the Chances for a Wilsonian Moment

The First World War, although it was definitely not solely a European war, was
not really a military concern for Korea. Japan’s involvement was also relatively
limited, both geographically and with regard to the time span for actual mili-
tary activities by Japanese troops. Nevertheless, as recent studies have clearly
emphasized, the war was well perceived in Japan and definitely had an impact
on the country that should not be underestimated and goes way beyond eco-
nomic developments. In Korea, the “sudden outbreak of the Korean indepen-
dence movement shook the Japanese empire to its core,” especially since the
colonial authorities were totally surprised at such massive protests throughout
the whole peninsula.

149 Ibid.
150 Ji-Yeon Yuh, Moving within Empires: Korean Women and Trans-Pacific Migration, in:
Catherine Ceniza Choy and Judy Tzu-Chun Wu (Eds.), Gendering the Trans-Pacific World, Lei-
151 The recently published and very important study about Japan and the First World War by
Jan Schmidt shows clearly the transnational impact during and after the war. Jan Schmidt,
Nach dem Krieg ist vor dem Krieg. Medialisierte Erfahrungen des Ersten Weltkriegs und
Nachkriegsdiskurse in Japan (1914–1919), Frankfurt am Main 2021.
152 Jun Uchida, Brokers of Empire. Japanese and Korean Business Elites in Colonial Korea,
in: Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen (Eds.), Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century.
These countrywide protests were stimulated or aroused by a “combination of catalytic factors” that will be discussed later in some detail. One main element, however, was the perception of US President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points that sparked the idea that Korean independence was in reach if sufficient people in the country expressed their wish to be freed from the Japanese yoke of imperialism. Korean nationalism had aimed for independence since 1910, but it was only in 1919 that the struggles of oppositional forces inside and outside Korea were able to link their own activities to an international idea that not only stimulated the hopes of the masses but also united them to actively demand independence for a sovereign Korean nation. The “heavy-handed control measures” of the Japanese colonial authorities might have limited the possibilities for unified action from the different nationalist organizations and their respective representatives, but they had also alienated the masses of the Korean population. Therefore, as Robinson expertly formulated it, “Korea resembled an enormous pressure cooker,” and in 1919, the steam had to get out. While some Koreans had tried to search for their own possibilities for reforms, change, and a future marked by common international ideas about modernity, the search for identity, e.g. the discussions about the “new woman” (Sin yōja), also stimulated reflections about the idea of the Korean nation and independence. Prominent women activists from Japan like Yosano Akiko (1878–1942) and Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971) became role models for some women in Korea, but at the same time, the critical thinking about gender roles also took place in a colonial context that naturally became an aspect of the intellectual struggle. Korean feminist Na Hyesŏk (1896–1948) criticized the Japanese ideal of the “good wife and wise mother” that had been prominent since the Meiji period and wrote about the “Ideal Woman” in 1914:

I also believe that it is not wise to only pursue the customary ideal of “good wife, wise mother” (yangch’ŏ hyŏnmo). It seems that that ideal is one of the favorite marketing strategies used by teachers. The man is both husband and father; but I have never heard of any curriculum that emphasizes “good husband, wise father” (yangbu hyŏnbu). It is only women whose conduct as good spouse and wise parent is reinforced through our education, making women into mere appendages of men. Such an education does not develop the mind. Also, the idea of a warm and compliant womanhood, a necessary point of propaganda to turn women into slaves, cannot be an ideal for women.

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153 Ibid.
154 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 43.
155 Ibid.
She consequently demanded a drastic change with regard to the education of women, as Na demanded nothing less than enlightenment all Korean women:

Until now, women have been raised in the ideology that instructs them to devote themselves entirely to the welfare of men. They are so accustomed to the domestic arena that they cannot tell right from wrong in matters that are outside of the private domain. Given this, how can a woman evolve into an ideal woman? Of course, she needs knowledge, skills, and artistic talent. She should be prepared to judge right from wrong in any matter, based on her common sense. She should be self-aware, with the desire to discover her unique abilities in realizing certain goals in life. She must understand contemporary thought, knowledge, and sensibility. Only then can she become a pioneer, equipped with all the power and qualifications that she needs in order to be an enlightened, ideal woman.158

The inaugural editorial of the journal *New Woman* (*Sin yŏja*) declared in 1920 that the experience of the First World War would demand a total reconfiguration of human society, not only in Korea, but in the world, where imperialism and exploitation had caused enormous destruction:

Reform (*kaejo*)! This is the outcry of humankind after painfully grieving over the terrifying gunshot of the past five years [referring to World War I]. Liberation (*haebang*)! This is the call of women who have been confined to the deep, dark, inner chambers for thousands of years. Excessively greedy ambition and egoism caused the war, breaking the peace of springtime and bringing mountains of death and oceans of blood. This war opposed the will of heaven and the correct path of humankind. . . . Reform! Reform! This call for reform is echoed high and loud from every corner of the world. Truly the time has come for change. Ah, the new era has arrived. Time has come to break away from old things and bring in new things. The time has come to throw off the wrong-headed, evil practices of the past. The time has come to reform all things.159

The Japanese authorities were only interested in effective colonial bureaucracy and the strong assimilation of the Koreans; they did not pay attention to such thoughts about reforms. In 1915, the governor-general of Korea organized the Chosŏn Industrial Exposition, which “was clearly an embodiment of colonial hegemony”160 and would prove, first and foremost to the Koreans themselves, what Japanese colonial rule had done for the people. The exposition was visited by more than one million people, who were supposed to witness the greatness of the Japanese Empire and come to appreciate the fact that, for half a decade, Koreans had been part of this empire. In an evaluation of this exhibition, Hong Kal argues that “the visually oriented spectacle of the 1915 exposition was far

158 Ibid.
more effective in reaching out to the masses and relate them to the idea of nation than any other medium available at that time.\textsuperscript{161} The official report of the event further emphasized the Japanese narrative of a “civilizing mission” when it stated that

[s]ince the decline of Korea from ancient times . . . the country’s destiny was in danger. Koreans had been suffering, its industry had deteriorated, and its land had been ruined. In 1910, the empire set up the Government General of Korea, and . . . for the first time, the spirit of the country [Korea] was restored. However, it is not easy to awaken people from a hundred years of slumber. Under the blessing of the emperor, people have now realized the need to cultivate fields, plant trees, open ports, disseminate education, and improve morality. By the order of the emperor, the Government General has accomplished its colonial mission for the last five years. . . . It is worthwhile to compare the present achievement with the past. . . . Therefore, the Government General has organized the Korean Industrial Exposition.\textsuperscript{162}

The exposition in particular tried to diminish the value of Korean precolonial production through a comparison with Japanese goods: “The comparison was also made between customary objects as they were invested with meanings of the old and the new: the old signified the Chosŏn era and the new signified colonial Korea or Japan by extension.”\textsuperscript{163} Japan, which had profited economically during the war years, displayed its full capacity as an industrialized role model whose impact on Korea was supposedly an important necessity for the country’s own modernization, albeit within the realm and the realities of the Japanese Asian Empire. As Hong Kal, in her detailed analysis of the exhibition, further emphasizes,

[...]his rhetoric was also evident in the Reference Hall (Ch’amgogwan) and the Machinery Hall (Kigyegwan) in which advanced industrial instruments, products and machines from Japan (and a few from Taiwan) were displayed as a visual witness of Japanese modernity and at the same time served as a visual reference for Koreans to follow in the course of progress under the guidance of Japanese colonialism.\textsuperscript{164}

This “principle of hierarchical comparison located colonial Korea within a linear evolutionary trajectory of history in which Korea moved from its pre-industrial to an industrial phase under the tutelage of Japan.”\textsuperscript{165} The exhibition, in a way, proves that the Japanese colonial authorities considered their assimilation policy to have been successful, and this success was to be displayed to the visitors. At

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., p. 15.  
\textsuperscript{162} Cited in ibid., p. 16.  
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., p. 22.  
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.
the same time, they believed a silent agreement based on the admiration of Japan’s achievements had been reached. It is probably because of this belief that the policy of assimilation’s further course would remain uncontested that the eruption of nationalist demands for independence in 1919 initially shocked the Japanese.

It may be that the authorities had simply been unaware of this possibility, but with regard to the criticism directed at them, the colonial government was unable to understand that, regardless of the public absence of protests, disagreement with the Japanese rule was strong among many Koreans. The censors had tried during the First World War to keep any discussion about the idea of the self-determination of nations out of Korean newspapers, but Wilson’s Fourteen Points\textsuperscript{166} were popular and sparked hope for a new era in Korea’s history with a return to independence.\textsuperscript{167} Wilson’s ideas also gained momentum because the aforementioned Korean expatriates were spreading the word about them and linking these ideals that had been formulated in a Kantian tradition with the ambition to regain the right to self-determination from Japan.\textsuperscript{168} It was the Korean nationalists who looked at the European post-war developments and the American President and “adopted the Wilsonian vision of a new international order as an unprecedented opportunity for Korea to emerge – or to reemerge, as they saw it – as an independent, equal member in the expanding community of nations.”\textsuperscript{169} What has been described as a “dark period” was consequently ended by an \textit{ex occidente lux}, personified by the academic and champion of democracy, Woodrow Wilson. That the Korean nationalists were inspired by his thoughts and demands was in a way also due to Japanese restrictions, because “Korean students, encouraged to attend Japanese universities as part of the assimilation policy, had access to literature promoting liberal ideas and criticizing Japanese rule that the military authorities had banned from Korea itself.”\textsuperscript{170}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[168]{Robert Bernasconi, Ewiger Friede und totaler Krieg, in: Alfred Hirsch and Pascal Delhom (Eds.), Denkwege des Friedens. Aporien und Perspektiven, München 2019, pp. 50–70, here p. 61. The connection between Kant and Wilson was already emphasized by contemporary authors. See, among others, Klaus Vorländer, Kant und der Gedanke des Völkerbundes, Leipzig 1919, pp. 67–85.}
\footnotetext[169]{Manela, The Wilsonian Moment, p. 120.}
\footnotetext[170]{Ibid., p. 125.}
\end{footnotes}
The Korean National Association in the United States was important in this regard, especially as its early leading members not only provided important information about the events related to the First World War but also because, since the early 1910s, they had tried to keep Korea and its fate as a topic in the public debates of the United States. In December 1918, an open letter by the association asked Koreans in North America to stay united and prepare for an independence struggle that would soon bring Korea back into the community of sovereign nation-states. It was furthermore argued at a meeting in San Francisco that “in light of Wilson’s vision for the postwar settlement, Koreans should submit a petition to the peace conference after the war and make an appeal to the United States and to Wilson himself to recognize Korean independence.”\(^{171}\) Syngman Rhee, among others, was selected to be part of a delegation to the peace conference, where the representatives of the Korean cause were to make sure that the matter really got the attention it needed. The delegates also informed President Wilson early on of their trip to Paris and their intentions, and it is not surprising that they put all their hopes on the United States and its leading representative at that time. As Erez Manela explains, the perceptions of Wilson and US democracy were decisive for the Korean expatriates’ assumption that their cause at the peace conference would best be served by the American delegation:

As with other anticolonial activists, Korean perceptions of Wilson and their hopes for his support drew on long-standing views of the United States as an exemplar of modern civilization and the power most sympathetic toward colonial aspirations for independence. Among Korean nationalists, moreover, such perceptions of the United States were more common and more deeply entrenched than among other colonial peoples, given the impact of Protestant missions in Korea and the prominence among expatriate activists of men who studied and lived in the United States.\(^{172}\)

Around the same time, there were also activities in Japan, where Korean students did not just passively observe the events but intended to use the opening window of opportunity at the end of the war to strengthen the chances of a successful attempt to regain independence.

Chang Tŏksu (1895–1947), a prominent Korean student and nationalist activist in Japan, met with Yŏ Unhyŏng (1886–1947), who ran a school for Koreans in Shanghai, where they established the New Korea Youth Association that was supposed to coordinate the work of Korean student exiles in China and Japan to use their power to demand independence. They also hoped to use their contact

\(^{171}\) Ibid.
\(^{172}\) Ibid., p. 127.
with the American businessman Charles R. Crane (1858–1939)\textsuperscript{173} to get in touch with Wilson, especially since Crane had outlined the idea of self-determination at several events he spoke at in China.\textsuperscript{174} Like the Korean National Association in the US, the New Korea Youth Association elected a delegate to be sent to Paris. Kim Kyu-sik, an orphan raised and trained by the US missionary Horace G. Underwood (1859–1916) and who had studied in the United States – at Roanoke College, VA and later Princeton University –, was elected, and although there were numerous issues that made it almost impossible for him to get to Paris, he managed to travel there with a Chinese passport and under a false name.\textsuperscript{175} Another organization, the Korean Youth Independence Association, which had been organized by Korean students in Japan, also became active during the peace talks that were held in Paris. The students wanted to do something that would draw the international community’s attention to the Korean cause, which is why the writer Yi Kwang-su (1892–1950) was requested to draft a declaration of Korean independence. On 8 February 1919, the declaration was read out loud in front of the YMCA building in Tokyo.\textsuperscript{176} The text was then sent by other Korean activists through their Chinese channels to Korea, where it found a fruitful ground and much attention in the nationalist circles. The American consul general in Korea described the situation there in January 1919 as follows:

There can be no doubt that the present general movement throughout the world looking towards the self-determination of peoples, and particularly of the subject races, has produced its effect on the thought of the people in this country. At the outset of the war there was a strong undercurrent among the Koreans of hostility to the Allies, a feeling that arose from a not unnatural antagonism to Japan, one of the Allies. As the war progressed, however, and the ultimate aims of the Allies were more carefully and fully stated, those Koreans who are accustomed to look beyond immediate conditions in their own country and to view affairs here in light of world conditions began to see that they might also be affected in no adverse manner by the victory of the Allies.\textsuperscript{177}

The situation was then further intensified by the death of Kojong, the former Korean emperor who had been forced to abdicate his throne in 1907 by the Japanese. William Massy Royds (1843–1919), the British consul-general in Seoul, reported in early March about the interrelationship of this event with the March

\textsuperscript{173} On Crane’s life and activities see Norman E. Saul, The Life and Times of Charles R. Crane, 1858–1939. American Businessman, Philanthropist, and a Founder of Russian Studies in America, Lanham, MD 2013.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., p. 129.
\textsuperscript{176} Kim, A History of Korea, p. 332.
First Movement, stating that “His Highness’ death . . . called forth remarkable manifestations of grief throughout the Peninsula”\(^{178}\) and that

Everywhere the ex-Emperor is spoken of as a martyr in his country’s cause, the idea being that he took his own life to prevent his son’s marriage, and a popularity, which had rather waned since his abdication, was revived tenfold in his death. For many days immediately following the event, crowds of people assembled daily outside his palace, and prostrated themselves on mats, weeping loudly, and the whole nation went into mourning.\(^{179}\)

The preparations for the funeral coincided with the massive protests on 1 March 1919 that would find their place in the history books as the March First Movement. In his first report thereupon, William Massy Royds made this interrelationship between the immediate events in Korea and the and the prepared declaration of independence clear when he stated that

[t]wo days before the funeral, a so-called demonstration of independence took place in several parts of Seoul and in many large centres in the country simultaneously on a considerable scale. The city was then full of people from all parts of the country, who had been arriving for some time in large numbers, and the principal demonstration took place in front of the palace where the ex-Emperor’s body was lying . . . several hundreds of students suddenly rushed the guards at the palace gate, and burst into the grounds wildly cheering their declaration of independence. No attempt was made by them to use force, and fortunately no weapons were used by the police or soldiers, with the result that the demonstrators withdrew without any damage being done and dispersed in smaller bands to different parts of the city, where similar outbreaks had occurred.\(^{180}\)

After Kojong’s sudden death, rumors spread that he had been poisoned by the Japanese. The funeral also caused many Koreans to travel to Seoul to pay their tribute to the former emperor of Korea. This large influx of people made nationalist leaders debate the possibilities of how to use the current situation for the sake of Korean independence. The March First Movement would eventually unite the Korean intellectuals and the masses in their struggle to regain national freedom from Japan, which supposedly had the support of the international community and, in particular, of the United States.\(^{181}\)

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\(^{179}\) Ibid.

\(^{180}\) Ibid., pp. 1–2.

\(^{181}\) For a short summary of the March First Movement see Kim, A History of Korea, pp. 331–334.
4.5 The March First Movement

Korean students in Japan had witnessed the local rice riots in the aftermath of the First World War and probably also realized that anti-Japanese sentiments in China had been on the rise since 1915. These observations, in addition to the wishes for an international order that had been expressed by US President Wilson and many others, might have encouraged them in early 1919 to move toward more concrete actions to regain Korean independence, especially a public declaration of it in the first place. On 1 March 1919, thousands of Koreans followed their example and marched through the streets of Korean towns, demanding freedom and national sovereignty. The outburst had, in addition, been stimulated by the harsh assimilation policy of the colonial government and the Japanese suppression of the Korean population. In this light, it is correct to say that “[t]he disaster for the Japanese of the March First movement proved the failure of their initial colonial policy, and for Korea it signaled the maturity of the nationalist movement.” The mass protests were “a defining moment in modern Korean history,” and they remain an important focal point within the Korean nationalist memory even today, as they presented “a shining moment of national unity during the long dark night of Japanese rule.”

Japan was unable to contain the spread of information about the events within and outside of Korea, and, as part of a global protest wave against imperialism at the end of the First World War, the March First Movement countered the Japanese narrative of progress and unity within the Japanese Empire, especially in its colonial possessions. The Korean declaration of independence showed the unity of its people and their wish to get rid of the imperialist yoke of Japanese rule.

While radical students were part of the movement’s preparation, the majority of its leadership had a religious background, as the churches and other religious organizations had been, as described before, the main organizational units for Korean resistance and nationalist activism since 1910. Information about the developments in international politics had made its way into the country through the Koreans living abroad, and the Wilsonian moment had sparked nationalist ambitions within the religious organizations that the time to claim independence had come. Originally, the protests were supposed to take place on the day of Kojong’s funeral, 3 March 1919, but the fear that the

183 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 43.
184 Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey, p. 47.
Japanese police could prevent the plot caused the organizers to speed things up. The official declaration of independence itself had been signed by 33 leading Christian, Buddhist, and Ch’ŏndogyo religious leaders.\(^ {185}\) The proclamation document clearly stated as follows:

> We proclaim, herewith, Korea an independent state and her people free. We announce it to the nations of the world and so make known the great truth of the equality of all humanity. We also make it known to our posterity for ten thousand generations that they may hold this right as a free people for all time. With the authority and dignity of 5,000 years of history and the devotion and loyalty of 20,000,000 people behind us, we make this proclamation. Thus we take this responsibility on behalf of the eternal freedom of our people. In order that we may move in accord with the opportune fortunes of a new era, when the conscience of humanity has awakened, we so act. It is the evident command of God, the trend of the age in which we live, the natural step in accord with the right of all peoples to live and move together. There is nothing in the world that should prevent it or stand in its way.\(^ {186}\)

The declaration of independence also emphasized that, without such independence, there would be no future for Korea and the following generations of Koreans:

> If we would rid ourselves of resentment over the past; if we would be free from the agony of the present; if we would escape violence for the future; if we would awaken once again the conscience of our people, now oppressed, or rouse the fallen state to a true endeavor; if we would rightly develop character in every man; if we would not pass on to our unfortunate children an inheritance of shame and distress; if we would have future generations for all time enjoy the perfection of blessing, we must, first and foremost, secure complete independence for our people.\(^ {187}\)

Emphasizing the timing of the declaration, the text also argued that the future of East Asia would also depend on a peaceful path for the future, because Japanese expansionism, a “disturbance to the peace of the Far East,” would eventually and “undoubtedly [only] result in calling down on the whole of East Asia the sad fate of universal destruction.”\(^ {188}\) According to Wilson’s Fourteen Points and the accompanying demands for a peaceful international order that would be formed by self-determination and equal coexistence, the proclamation also emphasized the beginning of a new era: “A new world opens before our eyes, the age of force departs and that of truth and righteousness comes on. The mind of humanity, refined, clarified, matured, trained by the ages of the past,
now begins to cast the morning light of a new civilization on the history of the race. A new spring dawns upon the world and all life hastens to awaken.”

Of those who signed the proclamation, 29 met on 1 March at a restaurant near Pagoda Park, where the declaration of independence was also to be read out. That Saturday, flyers were handed out and posters were posted in the streets that public gatherings would be held that day. Naturally, masses of people attended the events, and when the declaration of independence was read out, people cheered and the nationalist outcry was heard almost everywhere in the country, where similar gatherings followed in the next days. Those who had signed the declaration later gathered at a hotel and called the authorities to be arrested. The mass protests in the meantime remained peaceful and no acts of violence were committed by the Koreans, although “[a]t one point mounted gendarmes charged the crowd and inflicted some sabre cuts [and t]he police were arresting as many as they could.” Regardless of this immediate and aggressive response, around 1,500 demonstrations with around two million participants followed countrywide. Royds reported about these events on 13 March as follows:

The unrest . . . brought about simultaneous disturbances of a violent nature in most of the large centres throughout Corea, showing the movement to be the outcome of a remarkable organization. In several places the troops and police used their weapons, with the result that a considerable number of people including gendarmes were killed or wounded. . . . A printed manifesto . . . was issued on the 1st instant, proclaiming the independence of Corea, and appealing to the Peace Conference to uphold their claims. Stress was laid on the fact that resistance should not be made to the Authorities, and that force should not be used, the protest to be made being solely of a peaceful nature. . . . Twenty-nine of the 33 signatories were at once placed under arrest.

Due to the involvement of religious groups and organizations, the British diplomat was at the same time also worried for the foreign missionaries in Korea because, as he continued in his report, “the missionaries doubtless sympathize at heart with the natural desire of the Coreans to preserve their existence as a nation, though they all scrupulously refrain from any interference of a political nature and from any discussion of the subject with Coreans.” He furthermore emphasized that the Japanese assimilation policy was responsible for the nature

189 Ibid.
191 Ibid.
193 Ibid., p. 2.
of this massive protest movement, as the “Japanese policy at present openly aims at depriving the Coreans of even their own language and customs, and their total assimilation by Japan, and the deliberate attempt to enforce this policy by every available means is the cause of the universal hatred in which the Japanese are held throughout the land.”

While the demonstrations per se were peaceful, the Japanese reaction was rather harsh and, in some cases, particularly violent. The colonial authorities did not see this nationalist wave coming and were really surprised by the nationwide coordination of the protests. By mid-April, 7,500 demonstrators had been killed, 16,000 had been wounded, and more than 45,000 people had been arrested in relation to the events. In addition, more than 700 houses as well as two schools and 47 churches had been destroyed. The March First Movement was so powerful because it united all Koreans in a national struggle for independence and, as the Korean Information Bureau stated in 1919, “farmers, mechanics and laborers are equally as eager as the educated class to contribute their mite [sic!] in the efforts to regain their political independence.” It was such organizations, as well as Western observers and concerned politicians or diplomats, that reported about the events in Korea and linked them to the current moment of modern history. Carlton Waldo Kendall, a delegate of the Paris Peace Conference, published The Truth about Korea in 1919, in which he linked the events with the diplomatic negotiations: “The time to strike had come. When the Peace Conference, with its ideals of ‘self-determination,’ met in Paris, it gave to the oppressed Koreans the longed-for chance to place their problem before the world.” Kendall further emphasized that the Korean protesters were not dangerous political radicals or violent revolutionaries, two things the world – and especially the US – feared in 1919, two years after the revolution in Russia. He pointed out that the Korean organizers’ “plan was to begin a ‘Passive Revolution’. No one, not even the Japanese, was to be harmed. No property was to be destroyed or

194 Ibid.
195 Kim, A History of Korea, p. 333. Also see Kendall, The Truth about Korea, p. 10. These numbers are estimates by Korean historians. The Japanese authorities only confirmed 553 deaths, 1,409 injured people, and a number of 12,522 arrests. Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey, p. 48. For the Japanese reports of the events see Chōsen sōjō keika gaiyō, Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR), A04017275800.
196 Korean Information Bureau, Little Martyrs of Korea, Philadelphia, PA 1919, p. 5.
injured. No radicalism, no I.W.W.-ism, no Bolshevism was to be tolerated or associated in any way with the movement. But a persistent passive agitation was to be instituted and continued until success attended their object-freedom from Japanese Military Autocracy.”

Kendall also argued that the organizers had focused on protests in Seoul as they wanted to use the proximity of the foreign legations to arouse international attention to the Korean cause. The sheer mass of people who had answered the nationalist call across the whole country was simply too much for the Japanese to bear, and frustration might have played an important part in the violent measures taken by the colonial police in the aftermath of 1 March 1919.

Six days after the initial protests, Governor-General Hasegawa Yoshimichi (1850–1924) urged the Koreans not to resist Japan’s colonial rule due to false rumors when he published the following instructions: “Rumour was recently circulated that at the preliminary peace conference in Paris the independence of Chosen was recognized by foreign Powers, but the rumour is absolutely groundless. It need hardly be said that the sovereignty of the Japanese Empire is irrevocably established in the Peninsula and will never be broken in the future.” While the colonial authorities wanted to show strength in Korea, Tokyo tried to avoid attracting too much international attention to the recent events, but the reports by missionaries from Korea damaged the Japanese image abroad. The Korean Information Bureau published reports that emphasized that even children who wanted to support the nationalist cause of the people of Korea were severely punished by the Japanese police apparatus. One such report stated the following:

After the leaders and adults had a demonstration in Seoul, the boys and girls of all the schools in that city, without the knowledge of their elders, gathered in Pagoda Park and declared themselves in sympathy with their elders. They read the Declaration of Independence, and then giving their national cry of “Toknip Mansei” (Independence Forever), they rushed down the principal streets of the city, holding up their hands and waving their caps, lustily shouting for their independence. These children were immediately met by the Japanese gendarmes and police, with drawn swords and fixed bayonets and were driven back with many casualties. About six o’clock, when the sun disappeared behind the western hills, these brave little patriots disappeared from the streets.

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199 The Truth about Korea, p. 25.
201 Ibid., pp. 27–30.
203 Korean Information Bureau, Little Martyrs, p. 6.
Another report about a young Korean girl is quite heartbreaking:

One of the girls in our school came to the principal, and said: “I must go home to see my mother on a very important matter.” The principal immediately gave her permission to leave, so she packed her belongings and started for home. When she entered her home she greeted her mother, and then with a very determined look on her young face, said, “Mother, I have come to see you for a few minutes, as I have decided to give my life for my country, and wanted to see you once more and say good-bye.” Her mother was ignorant of the demonstrations taking place all over the country, and asked her daughter for an explanation. The little girl then gave her some of the story she had heard of the independence movement, and then exclaimed, “Mother, I must do something for my country; I must go out and shout for our independence and give my life for our freedom.”

From the perspective of foreign observers, the “Japanese reaction bordered on hysteria,” but when one considers the history of the industrial exposition in 1915 and the belief that the assimilation of the Koreans into the Japanese Empire had been fast and successful, the surprise of the mass protests must have aroused anger and desperation within Japanese colonial circles that caused them to respond extremely violently to the Korean wish for independence. Or, as a contemporary pamphlet argued, “shame and self-remorse quickly gave way to Prussian-like brutality.” Since the protests continued until the early summer, they could not easily be repressed, and therefore this added frustration further intensified the violent responses from the police and the Japanese authorities. As Michael Robinson has pointed out, it was Japanese helplessness that was leading to extreme forms of violence:

By mid-April rioting was widespread, and police violence led to a number of well-documented atrocities: the burning of villages, shooting on crowds, mass searches, arrests, and the disappearance of demonstrators. The police also seized printing presses, closed schools, and declared a colony-wide curfew. Still the rioting continued sporadically into the summer of 1919 and was controlled only after additional troops arrived from Japan.

The violent reactions were also causing problems for Japan’s international reputation: “The horror and brutality of some of the deeds committed are beyond belief. In the name of crushing the Independence Movement, the military authorities have transgressed the laws of all civilization and proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that Japanese Military Autocracy is no longer fit to be

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204 Ibid., p. 11.
205 Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, p. 44.
206 The Korean Independence Movement, Shanghai n.d. [1919?].
207 Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey, p. 48.
respected by any civilized people.” The acts of the police were described in detail, and the fact that women and children were among the victims who “were knocked down with the butts of rifles” gave rise to harsh criticism, and not only from the Korean communities abroad. The authenticity of reports about the atrocities and massacres conducted in Korea became a topic of international debate.

A particularly cruel “incident” was reported in Cheam-ni, in the south of Seoul, on 15 April 1919, when the Japanese locked the doors of a church and set it on fire, and 29 people were burned alive. The “incident” became known as the “Cheam-ni Massacre,” and although the Japanese officer responsible was charged and sentenced, the history of the massacre would further poison Japanese-Korean relations in the years to come. Considering the fact that the protests were answered so violently and yet did not cause any international intervention against Japanese rule, “a general tenor of disillusionment, frustration, and despondency set in.” The poet O Sang-sun remarked on these feelings in an editorial in his journal P’yeho (Ruins):

Our land of Korea is in ruins. These are times of sorrow and agony. Saying this will wrench the heart of our youth. But I must, for it is a fact that I can neither deny nor even doubt. In ruins lie all our defects and shortcomings, inside and outside, physical as well as mental: emptiness, grievances, discontent and resentment, sighs and worries, pain and tears – all these evils will lead to extinction and death. As we stand before the ruins, darkness and death open their fearsome, cavernous mouths, threatening to gobble us up. Again, we are struck by the feeling that the old ruins spell extinction and death.

The situation was particularly devastating for so many Koreans because the US President had not interfered on behalf of their right to self-determination; instead, he and the great international powers had simply accepted the realities Japan had created in Korea by the use of brute force. The Korean delegates who were sent to Paris had urged Wilson to understand the situation. They “simply wish[ed] to expose certain facts and truths and only solicit[e] your impartial judgment for the sake of HUMANITY AND JUSTICE that are being trampled over under the iron heel of the Asiatic Kaiser who really surpasses his Prussian

208 Kendall, The Truth about Korea, p. 33.
209 Ibid., 31.
211 Arita-chū ni kakaru saiban senkoku no kudan hōkoku, JACAR, C03022465000.
212 Park, Protestantism and Politics, p. 139.
213 Cited in ibid.
pattern.” The petition that was handed to Wilson emphasized the injustice of Japanese colonial rule in Korea and warned the international community about the future, which would be dangerous for peace due to Japan’s “continental policy” and its “policy in operation” in Korea. There were, of course, Western voices that called for support for the Korean claim for independence, but they were unheard in the chambers of power where the new world order was eventually negotiated. Demands were, however, made, especially with regard to Wilson’s ideas about self-determination:

The principles which underlie the right of self-determination must be applied universally if they are to be applied at all. The doctrines which President Wilson has been preaching and for which America has so solidly stood throughout the war, and which are now being promulgated by the League of Nations, are mere words if they can not be applied concretely. No nation in the world has a better claim to independence than Korea. It is therefore timely to consider the plight of this people. . . . With the development of the doctrine of self-determination there has come a recrudescence of nationality in Korea, the Hermit Kingdom, the Land of the Morning Calm, that has manifested itself in rioting in Seoul and other large centers, the establishment of revolutionary headquarters in Siberia and in the sending of a delegate to the Peace Conference at Paris with a plea for recognition of the rights of the Korean people to govern themselves without the interference of Japan. . . . Self-determination is one of the accepted policies of the Peace Conference. It is just as important to the world that democracy should be safe in Korea as it is that, for the protection of the balance of power in Europe, the national aspirations of Poland, Czecho-Slovakia and Jugo-Slavia should be recognized. The Koreans, notwithstanding the assertions of certain eminent Japanese at present in this country, are capable of self-government and are entitled to it unless the Peace Conference is going to put the Far East and its subject nations upon a different basis from those of Eastern Europe. Such a result would be a stultification of all of the principles for which the war was fought and upon which the world expects peace to be established.

Such interventions nevertheless could not change the fact that the Korean people and their fate were simply ignored. The international community was not willing to really live up to the ideals they had all claimed to long for, and the people of Korea were the victims of the fact that Japan was to be kept a member of the world’s major powers, regardless of its colonial policies.

Eventually, Japan reacted by adopting a new course when the Hara Cabinet appointed a new governor-general, Saitō Makoto, and “replaced naked coercion
with a softer but even more effective policy of manipulation and co-optation.”217 The “attitudinal changes”218 in the aftermath of the March First Movement nevertheless did not change the fact that Korea was to be assimilated and remain an essential part of Japan’s overseas empire. Korean political activists radicalized further, and those who had organized anti-Japanese resistance were now leaning more toward communist support from China than hoping for democratic lip service from Western powers.219 Regardless of these trends, there were also numerous provisional governments that were formed in the aftermath of the March First Movement in which prominent figures of post-war Korean history, like Syngman Rhee, were active,220 while the Koreans in exile continued to keep the fate of their home country in the global consciousness.

4.6 Conclusion

The March First Movement was tragic but also, at the same time, “a historic event that helped define a nation in a time of need.”221 It showed that the Korean nation was still alive and that Japanese assimilation policies had failed, regardless of the fact that the Japanese authorities claimed to have modernized Korea according to their own standards. The tragedy of Korea in 1919 was Japan’s strength and importance after the First World War. The Western powers did not want to sacrifice their good relations with their war-time ally for an ideal like self-determination, even if President Wilson had argued on behalf of this ideal in the latter phase of the First World War. The war years had instead intensified Japanese rule, and Korea’s attempt at its end to regain independence was not able to gain international support. For all nationalist activists,

217 Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey, p. 49. Also see Uchida, Brokers of Empire. Japanese and Korean Business Elites, pp. 155–156. Regardless of Saitō’s supposedly milder course, his aims were the same: “The kernel of Saitō’s strategy for dealing with Korean nationalism, however, was to mobilize local men of influence, Korean as well as Japanese. From the outset, the Saitō administration labored hard to crystallize whatever tenuous ties the colonial state had forged with the Korean upper class.” Ibid., p. 156.
218 Caprio, Japanese Assimilation Policies, p. 112.
221 Ibid., p. 89.
this marked the weakness of the post-war order and the failure to achieve a true Wilsonian moment that could have initiated a new, peaceful world order. Nationalisms and imperialist ambitions were still too powerful, and the Korean protesters seemed to have suffered without any tangible result. What they nevertheless proved was the fact that Korea had a strong national identity and that its people would not give in to the Japanese narrative of their benevolent empire.

The nationalist struggle therefore continued, but the hope for a democratic intervention was replaced with anger about international imperialism in general and Western indifference in particular. It is therefore also important to understand the shortcomings of the post-war order from a more global perspective, as the results of the peace treaties that were established in the aftermath of the First World War not only determined European history for the years to come but also poisoned the existent political relations in East Asia, especially between Japan and Korea.