Frederick Arthur McKenzie on the Japanese Seizure of Korea

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The journalistic contributions of Frederick Arthur McKenzie (1869–1931) to our understanding of the Japanese incursion and occupation of Korea are here considered. In addition to correspondence for the Pall Mall Gazette and the London Daily Mail, McKenzie produced a number of monographs, including From Tokyo to Tiflis: Uncensored Letters from the War (1905); The Unveiled East (1907); The Tragedy of Korea (1908); and Korea’s Fight for Freedom (1920).

The brutality of Japanese rule in Korea from 1910 to 1945 is well known. Japanese killed thousands of protesting Koreans during the March First Independence Movement of 1919, and during the 1930s the Japanese forced tens of thousands of Koreans to work in Japanese factories and to serve in the Japanese army. Over two hundred thousand young Korean women worked as “Comfort Women”—sexual slaves for Japanese soldiers. The legacy of Japanese barbarism affects relationships between the two nations even today.

What is less well known is that the violence and brutality of Japanese against Koreans began much earlier than 1910. The forcible Japanese move against Korea began as early as the 1870s. The Japanese first entered Korea as potential saviors who would bring modern civilization and true independence to a most backward and isolated people, but the talk of providing for the Korean people was little more than a ruse that allowed for the rapid seizure of Korea and the literal rape of its land and people. The Koreans were well aware of what was happening to their land and fought valiantly for their freedom, but they lacked both a strong military and the necessary weaponry to combat the systematic brutality of the Japanese.

It is a common assumption that while Japanese troops behaved badly in World War II, killing and raping as their armies moved first across China and then into Southeast Asia, their behavior in the Russo-Japanese War was exemplary. It is often said that Japanese troops were kind to the Koreans as they marched north through their country in
1904 and 1905 to fight their Russian enemy in Manchuria. They hired the Koreans as “coolies” to carry their wares and to perform other chores at high wages, paid Korean farmers for the food and other supplies that they got from them, and were not engaged in immoral conduct with the Korean public, especially Korean women. The reality of 1905, however, was just the opposite. Even as the fighting against the Russians in Manchuria continued, the Japanese army and police instigated a campaign of brutal terror to take control of the twenty million Koreans.

While Americans at home as well as many Europeans turned a blind eye to Japan’s brutal acts in Korea in the years immediately after the Russo-Japanese War, a few brave Western journalists and missionary educators like Professor Homer Hulbert (1863–1949) wrote articles and books detailing what was happening on the ground in Korea. The most graphic and prolific writer was Canadian-born British journalist Frederick Arthur McKenzie, who came to Korea to cover the Russo-Japanese War and then stayed to the great annoyance of the Japanese to cover their brutal assault on Korea after the war. He published many books, articles, and gave public lectures in later years in Britain. McKenzie during the war traveled in Korea and Manchuria with American novelist Jack London, a reporter for the Hearst newspapers and American writer Robert L. Dunn. During the early segment of the war they were among the only Western journalists who were traveling north with the Japanese army.

McKenzie, however, paints a very convincing story to counter this view of Japanese conduct. He demonstrates that the Japanese never had any intention from the start of their modernization in the 1870s not to exert their authority over Korea. They used gunboats to open Korea in 1876 to penetration by Japanese business and investment. Hundreds and then thousands of Japanese moved to Korea in the latter part of the nineteenth century, so much so that by the early 1900s there were just under a hundred thousand Japanese in Korea.

Japan’s goal by the 1890s, according to McKenzie, was to become the “leader of a revived Asia. She is advancing to-day along three lines—territorial expansion, increased fighting power, and an aggressive commercial campaign” (McKenzie 1907, 19). Korea was to be the heart, the nerve center of its growing empire in northeast Asia. The Japanese told the world that their goal was the benevolent modernization of Korea—that Japan would invest its people and resources in the creation of a strong independent state and that Korea would be a showplace of Japan’s modernization program. The reality, according to McKenzie, was very different. Japan was prepared to use crude aggressive force to seize full control over Korea and to employ whatever brutality was
necessary to subdue the Koreans. In short, the Japanese military and police sought to bulldoze Korea into total submission by means of “sheer terrorism” which included beating and killing innocent civilians, torturing many others, and physically harming, violating and humiliating women. In other words, McKenzie feels, the Japanese had ventured to the lower depths of barbarism to get their way. He wonders why the British entered into an alliance with such people, an alliance which the Japanese would inevitably break (ibid, 9).

Traditionally, Korea had been a very isolated nation, a place that greatly valued having virtually no connection with the outside world except for a tributary relationship with China which in exchange offered Korea protection from any outside invasion. The Japanese in the late 1500s had attempted to use Korea as an invasion route into China. The Japanese invasion had failed, but the Chinese wanted to be sure that the Japanese or any other foreign force would threaten them again through Korea. Therefore, when starting in the late 1870s Japanese began to pour into Korea, the Chinese sent in troops which in due course led to the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) which was won by Japan.

Japan’s victory placed it in a very strong position in Korea. Korea’s long isolation, refusal open itself to modern technology, and the rampant corruption that found its way into every corner of Korean society had rendered the country pathetically weak just as Japan was becoming a major world power. There was no Korean military to speak of and the Korean monarchy was powerless against the Japanese juggernaut. The Korean government had signed treaties with various Western states such as the United States and Great Britain in the early 1880s in an effort to counter Japanese influence, but in fact if not in theory, the West really had no interest in Korea. The only Western state with a genuine interest in Korea was Russia, which hoped to gain power in Korea so as to gain access to Korea’s warm water ports.

Japan’s first goal after its victory in China was to seize control over the Korean government which in effect meant making the Korean Emperor a virtual puppet of the Japanese. Empress Myeongseong (1851–95), a powerful figure in her own right, did everything she could to counter Japanese influence. The Japanese response was to launch a military raid into the palace that led to the assassination of the Empress in late 1895. The Emperor in 1897 snuck into the heavily guarded Russian Embassy in an effort to free himself from Japanese control. He was successful for a while, but by 1904 the Japanese had reasserted their control over the Emperor and Korea. Japan declared war on Russia in 1904 when the Russians refused to consent to Japan’s goal of becoming the predominant power in Korea.
McKenzie notes that the Koreans had also disliked the Russians and that they had initially welcomed the entrance of the main Japanese army into their country a way to get rid of the Russians. The Japanese entrance into Korea, says McKenzie, was something akin to a Trojan Horse. Japanese officials clearly stated that their goal was indeed to help Korea stand tall as a modern independent state. The Japanese government signed a protocol with the Korean government affirming its friendship and promising real economic development for the Korean people. Japanese troops in fact behaved very well in early 1904 as they moved north to counter the Russians who were waiting for them by the Yalu River that divided China from northern Korea.

By 1905, however, following Russia’s defeat, the face of the Japanese occupation changed drastically. The Japanese military seized control of the Korean Emperor and forced him to sign a document that gave the Japanese administrative control over the Korean government. Japanese then began seizing large chunks of valuable land from Korean farmers and landowners. Koreans who resisted or protested in any way were brutally killed or tortured and thrown in prison. The seizure and rape of Korea had begun.

McKenzie very ably summarizes the changes that occurred in Korea between 1904 and 1906:

When on a February evening in 1904, I stood on the ice-covered wharves at Chemulpho [modern Incheon], watching the advance guard of the Japanese army disembarking on the mainland of Asia, I saw them with exultation in my heart. The blaze from paraffin and coal fires on the water's edge revealed the sturdy and well-clothed soldiers of the Mikado as they stepped briskly from the lighters to the rocks. I turned to my fellow Europeans there. “At last,” we said to one another, “strength and justice have come to Korea.” The very natives smiled on the new arrivals. For myself I was proud to be the first white man to greet the Japanese General with words of welcome.

That was three years ago. A little over two years after that memorable February night I traveled again from north to south in Korea. I came across many of my old friends—diplomatic officials, missionaries, teachers, merchants and natives. In 1904 they had been almost without exception enthusiastic for Japan; in 1906 they were almost unanimously critical, unsympathetic, and full of denunciation. The change had come because of what they had seen of the methods of Japanese administration. Everywhere, from men of the most varied type, I heard the same story, a tale of oppression, exaction, and wholesale robbery.

When the Japanese first came to Korea, they were received by the common people with sympathy and hope. To-day the common people hate them with the most intense bitterness. The first cause for this hatred is national. The Koreans say that the Japanese wormed their way among them under the guise of friendship, with fair words and solemn promises
to maintain their independence. Then, having planted their troops all over the land and broken the Korean power, they violated their promises and deprived the nation of its freedom. The more intelligent Koreans admit, as they cannot but admit that the loss was largely their own fault. Their country relied upon treaty promises in place of national efficiency. It had degenerated and did not deserve to live. And yet the degeneration affected the officials rather than the mass of the common people. “If we had only a chance,” the men of the north have said to me more than once, “we could show that we are fit to hold our own.” (McKenzie 1907, 62)

The national aspect is not the only or the most important one. Had the Japanese done justly, and had they behaved fairly to the masses, the wounded national sentiment would have been but a minor danger. The Korean coolie, farmer and tradesman were tired of being corruptly and cruelly governed [by their own people], and they would have welcomed any administration, under whatever name, which gave them safety and equitable dealing. But they complain that, cruel and abominable as were the old administrators, the Japanese are worse.

One complaint of the Korean people is that the Japanese have taken over the entire machinery of the Government of the country and are using it mainly for the financial profit of the Japanese people. They are, officially and unofficially, pushing forward schemes of extortion, robbery, and cruelty which in three years have inflicted more actual damage than the worst Government of the old style could have done in 30 years (ibid, 62-65).

Japanese soldiers and civilians seized Korean property, especially land, from Koreans of all classes. They attacked not only Koreans, but Americans and other foreigners, including missionaries, at will. Korean Christians were especially vulnerable to beatings and death at the hands of Japanese soldiers and police and many of their churches were burnt to the ground. Thousands of Koreans were arrested and imprisoned without charge. McKenzie found conditions in the prison to be barbarous. In one cell in what is now the city of Pyongyang, he found 18 men and one woman confined in one small cell. Some of the men were fastened to the ground by wooden stocks. All had been terribly beaten by Japanese police.

McKenzie found that Japanese showed utter disdain for the “white man” in Korea.

Everything that is possible has been done to rob the white man of whatever prestige is yet left to him. The most influential white men in Korea are the missionaries, and they have a large and enthusiastic following. Careful and deliberate attempts have been engineered to induce their converts to turn
from the lead of the English and American teachers and to throw in their lot with the Japanese. The native press, under Japanese editorship, systematically preaches anti-white doctrines.....I have heard stories from friends of my own, residents in the country, quiet and inoffensive people, that have made my blood boil. It is difficult to restrain one’s indignation when a missionary lady tells you how she was walking along the street when a Japanese soldier hustled up against her and deliberately struck her in the breast. The Roman Catholic bishop was openly insulted and struck by Japanese soldiers in his own cathedral and nothing was done (McKenzie 1908, 150-151).

**A Journey to the “Righteous Army”**

By the summer of 1906 the people of Seoul had given up their protests against the violence and depravity of the occupying Japanese. McKenzie heard rumors that a large number of young Korean men, mainly from the Seoul area, had retreated deep in the mountains of eastern Korea to form the “Righteous Army” to fight against the Japanese. He learned that detachments of Japanese had been annihilated and others driven back. He also learned that the Japanese stuck back with “bitter vengeance” destroying whole towns and killing everybody in sight. McKenzie, the dutiful journalist, decided to head towards the mountains where it was said that the “Righteous Army” was hiding.

After a difficult sojourn to the fighting zone, McKenzie was able to slip out of view and enter a village held by the Korean fighters. He surmised quickly that they were badly armed and lacked ammunition, that they lacked adequate training in warfare and were poorly organized against a well organized huge Japanese military machine. The Japanese adapted a two-pronged strategy—to hunt the rebels in the countryside and to burn and destroy as many Korean villages as they could find in the region of the fighting.

McKenzie was horrified with the amount of destruction he saw in the villages:

I rode out of the villages heavy-hearted. What struck me most about this form of punishment, however, was not the suffering of the villagers so much as the futility of the proceedings....In place of pacifying a people, they were turning hundreds of poor families into rebels. During the next few days I was to see at least one town and many scores of villages treated as this one. To what end? The villagers were certainly not fighting the Japanese. All they wanted to do was to look quietly after their own affairs. Japan professed a desire to conciliate Korea and to win the affection and support of her people. In one province at least the policy of house-burning had reduced a prosperous community into ruin, increased the rebel forces,
and sown a crop of bitter hatred which it would take generations to root out. (McKenzie 1920, 78-79)

Later when McKenzie actually met a group of the rebels, he was not terribly impressed:

In another moment half a dozen of them entered the garden, formed a line in front of me and saluted. They were all lads, from 18 to 26. One, a bright-faced handsome youth, still wore the old uniform of the regular Korean Army. Another had a pair of military trousers. Two of them were in slight, ragged Korean dress. Around their waists were home-made cotton cartridge belts, half full...I looked at the guns they were carrying. The six men had five different patterns of weapons, and none was any good. One proudly carried an old Korean sporting gun of the oldest type of muzzle-loaders known to man. Around his arm was the long piece of thin rope which he kept smoldering as touch-powder, and hanging in front of him were the powder-horn and bullet bag for loading. The sporting gun was, I afterwards found, a common weapon. The ramrod, for pressing down the charge, was home-made and cut from a tree. The barrel was rust-eaten.

The second man had an old Korean army rifle, antiquated, and a very bad specimen of its time. The third had the same. One had a tiny sporting gun, the kind of weapon, warranted harmless, that fathers gave to their fond sons at age ten...[All the guns] were eaten up with ancient rust.

A pitiful group they seemed – men already doomed to certain death, fighting in an absolutely hopeless cause. But as I looked the sparkling eyes and smiles of the sergeant seemed to rebuke me. Pity! Maybe my pity was misplaced. At least they were showing their countrymen an example of patriotism, however mistaken their method of displaying it might be. (ibid, 84-85)

McKenzie had every reason to be skeptical of the chances of the Korean freedom fighters. The very large Japanese army, well-trained and well-armed, were determined at all cost to crush the Koreans, and in this they were ultimately successful. The Japanese killed indiscriminately in a successful effort to create terror. But the fighting continued until 1915 when the last Korean freedom fighter was murdered. McKenzie was the only foreigner to encounter the Korean freedom fighters. Thus his writing on this topic is the best contemporary reporting on this critical stage of Japan’s takeover of Korea (Duus, 229-230).

The Lack of Foreign Interest in the Fate of Korea

Despite articles and books by writers like McKenzie, people in the West remained ignorant or disinterested about what the Japanese were doing in Korea. Japanese moves immediately after the end of the Russo-
Japanese War (1904–05) to take over Korea met with a warm reception in the West. When missionary professor Homer Hulbert went to Washington in late 1905 as a representative of the Korean Emperor to request American assistance in repelling Japanese encroachments, he found the Roosevelt administration to be in full support of Japanese claims that their enforced modernization of Korea was for the good of its people.

Professor Hulbert met a very cold reception in Washington at a time that Japanese prestige in the United States was at its highest following its great victory over Russia (McKenzie 1908, 131). This refusal to help came as a shock to Korean leaders who had put their faith in an 1882 treaty of amity between the United States where it was stated that if other powers dealt unjustly or oppressively with Korea, America would exert her good offices to bring about an amicable settlement. But when Hulbert approached several senators for help, they replied, “What do you expect us to do?” and “Do you really believe that America ought to go to war with Japan over Korea?”

**Japan’s Goal was the Annihilation of Korea**

Japan’s goal from the very start in 1905 if not even earlier was the entire absorption of the country and the destruction of every trace of Korean nationality. One of the most influential Japanese leaders in Korea who talked to McKenzie as an anonymous source in 1905 was very frank about Japan’s intentions:

> You must understand that I am not expressing official views, but if you ask me as an individual what is to be the outcome of our policy, I can see only one end. This will take several generations, but it must come. The Korean people will be absorbed in the Japanese. They will talk our language, live our life, and be an integral part of us. There are only two ways of colonial administration. One is to rule over the people as aliens. This you English have done in India, and, therefore your Indian empire cannot endure. India must pass out of your rule. The second way is to absorb the people. That is what we will do. We will teach them our language, establish our institutions, and make them one with us. (McKenzie 1908 “The Japanese in Korea,” 61)

But this policy of assimilation had its limits. When Baron Kaneko Kentaro (1853–1942), Japan’s chief propagandist in the United States during the Russo-Japanese War, was asked if his country might encourage intermarriage between Koreans and Japanese in Korea. His reply was emphatic:
Not at all! On the contrary we will oppose it very vigorously. We shall consider the Koreans as a lower race; we will give them all possible liberty, but we shall in every possible way endeavor to maintain the Japanese spirit among the colonists that go among them. We believe in the superiority of the races, and not in amalgamation. (McKenzie 1907, 13)

The March First Movement

McKenzie goes to great lengths in his 1920 book *Korea’s Fight for Freedom* to describe the brutality of the Japanese suppression of the March First Movement. Koreans successfully organized peaceful demonstrations throughout their country to demand independence and an end to Japanese rule. Shouting “Mansei,” (“ten thousand years”), they marched hoping to further ignite a spirit of nationalism and national pride and to draw international attention to their plight. The March First demonstrations marked the highpoint in Korea’s struggle for independence from Japan’s colonial government. Although the demonstrations failed to achieve the desired goal of independence, they unified the Korean people in spirit as they persevere through another twenty-seven years in a Japanese colonial state.

The Japanese response was horrific. Demonstrators were shot dead in the streets, many more were taken to prisons where they were tortured and very often killed. It was a violent suppression that led to the deaths of an estimated 7500 Koreans and the severe wounding of another 16,000. A few examples will provide a graphic picture of the hurt that the Japanese inflicted on ordinary Koreans whether or not they had participated in the demonstrations. McKenzie quotes an American missionary who observed the torture going on in a rural village:

> A few hundred yards from where I am writing, the beating goes on, day after day. The victims are tied down on a frame and beaten on the naked body with rods till they become unconscious. Then cold water is poured on them until they revive, when the process is repeated. It is sometimes repeated many times. Men, women and children are shot and or bayonetted… A few miles from here a band of soldiers entered a village and ordered the men to leave, the women to remain behind. But the men were afraid to leave their women, and sent the women away first. For this the men were beaten… A short distance from this village, this band is reported to have met a Korean woman riding in a rickshaw. She was violated by four of the soldiers and left unconscious. A Korean reported the doings of this band of soldiers to the military commander of the
district in which it occurred and the commander ordered him to be beaten for reporting it. Word comes from another province of a woman who was stripped and strung up by the thumbs in an effort to get her to tell the whereabouts of her husband…. Here in this land it is probably safe to say that two thousand men, women and children, empty handed and helpless, have been put to death in seven weeks. (qtd. in McKenzie 1920, 142-143)

The Japanese vented special fury against Christians and Christian churches. When Japanese came to any village, they would separate the Christians from the non-Christians and then kill or torture only the Christians. McKenzie cites the example of a small village that was suddenly attacked by a squad of well-armed Japanese soldiers. The Japanese ordered all the male Christians to gather in the church. “When they had so gathered, to a number estimated to be thirty by our informers, the soldiers opened fire on them with rifles and then proceeded into the church and finished them off with sword and bayonets.” The soldiers then burnt the church and all the other houses in the village (ibid, 141).

McKenzie quotes an American reporter, William R. Giles of the Chicago Daily News, who investigated Japanese raids on villages in southern Korea:

After nearly three months of traveling in Korea, in which timer I journeyed from the north to the extreme south, I find that the charges of misgovernment, torture and useless slaughter by the Japanese to be substantially correct... In a valley about fifty miles from Fusan [Busan], the Japanese soldiery closed up a horseshoe-shaped valley surrounded by high hills, and then shot down the villagers who attempted to escape by climbing the steep slopes. I was informed that more than 100 persons were killed in this way. (ibid, 146)

The same reporter visited a prison where he found a cell, ten feet by six, occupied by more than thirty prisoners who had to stand tight in a crowd for days, depositing their feces on the ground and finding no relief from the stench and filth of the cell.

McKenzie reports that one of the extraordinary aspects of the March First demonstrations was the participation of women. The Japanese arrested and severely tortured many of these women, especially younger women. Younger women in particular were forced to undress and parade around prisons and on streets in front of both Japanese and Korean men. Many were raped repeatedly by Japanese soldiers. And they were harshly tortured. One form of torture inflicted on women was
to make them hold a heavy board or chair at arm’s length and to hold it out for an hour, beating anyone who faltered in any way. The Japanese guards would also twist their legs and spit in their faces.

One case stood out in McKenzie’s mind. A young widow was taken to a police office where a policeman stripped her down to her underwear. “Then the police began to take off her underclothes. She protested, whereupon they struck her in the face till she was black and blue. She still clung to her clothes, so they put a wooden paddle between her legs and tore her clothes away. Then they beat her. The beating took a long time. When it was finished the police stopped to drink tea and eat Japanese cakes, they and their companions amusing themselves by making fun of her as she sat there naked among them....” [Later a large crowd gathered outside the police station demanding to know why only younger women and not older women were being beaten after being stripped and why women and not men were stripped. The crowd was shocked to see the horribly damaged women prisoners when they were finally released. They thought about charging into the police office and stripping and beating the Japanese police chief, but a Christian elder said that such an act would only bring on more violence and persuaded them to go home (ibid, 162-164). The savage massacres and tortures of Koreans by Japanese continued unabated for over a year, finally coming to an end in late 1920.

References

