



The March 1st, 1919 Korean Movement: The First Steps of the Korean Independence Struggle

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Abstract

This article describes one of the first steps in the struggle for Korean independence, the March 1, 1919 Korean Movement. The March 1st Movement or so-called Samil Movement or Man-se Demonstration arose as a result of the repressive nature of colonial occupation under Imperial Japanese military rule after 1905. This movement took place at home and abroad, Son Byong-hui led the movement in Korea and Syngman Rhee carried out the struggle abroad. The National Uprising on March 1, 1919 in Korea was a protest movement to confront military aggression, repression, and looting carried out by the Japanese. The research method used in this article is, the historical method. The historical method is the process of testing and analyzing historical testimony to find authentic and reliable data, and the attempt to synthesize such data into a reliable historical story. The stages of research of the historical method are as follows: heuristics, criticism (historical), interpretation, presentation. This research has a research question, namely analyzing how the background of the events of the March 1, 1919 Korean movement, analyzing the course of events of the March 1, 1919 Korean movement and the impact that occurred after the March 1, 1919 Korean movement.

Keywords: *Japanese Colonialization; Korean Independence; March 1st; 1919 Movement*

Introduction

On March 1, 1919, a monumental revolutionary movement took place in Korea which became known as the March 1 Movement or the Korean Independence Movement which officially introduced the Korean Declaration of Independence to the world (Kim, 2006). This movement was the starting point of the brave and persistent struggle of the Korean people to achieve their independence from the Japanese occupation that was raging at that time. The March 1 Movement was an important milestone that inspired the spirit of nationalism, freedom, and resistance to oppression that was deeply rooted in the Korean people.

Korea at that time had been under Japanese rule for more than ten years. The Japanese occupation resulted in various acts of oppression and loss of human rights for the Korean people. Japan's colonial policies included restrictions on freedom of speech, the erasure of national culture and identity, and adverse economic exploitation. The March 1, 1919 Movement was the result of a movement spearheaded by a group of Korean intellectuals, activists, and nationalist leaders who had long opposed Japanese oppression. They realize that the oppression and disappearance of Korea's national identity will only

continue in the future if there is no decisive action. In 1919, prominent Korean figures secretly prepared a Declaration of Independence opposing Japanese rule on March 1, 1919 in Seoul's Tapgol park. The nationwide demonstrations took place peacefully, took quite a long time and involved more than one million Koreans. Japan responded with violence, killing thousands of people and many other arrests before the independence movement was quelled (Ch'oe, et al., 2000).

At this event, throughout Korea, Koreans from all walks of life gathered to voice their determination to achieve the long-awaited independence. Masses consisting of intellectuals, students, farmers, workers, and women held a peaceful demonstration, carrying banners, posters, and the national flag of Korea. They united in a spirit of unity and called on Japan to leave their homeland and restore their deprived independence. The March 1 movement was not only for one day, but continued for months. Although this movement could be physically suppressed by the colonial powers, the spirit and desire for independence was never extinguished. This movement marked the birth of the spirit of the Korean national struggle that would continue to flare up until it achieved full independence in 1945 after the end of World War II.

The struggle in the country was shown by the formation of anti-Japanese organizations, such as the Korean Independence Army, the Korean Sovereignty Restoration Group, and the Korean Independence Society. In China, Russia, and the United States, bases for the independence movement were established. This event is unprecedented in the world. The National Demonstration on March 1, 1919 in Korea was a protest movement to confront military aggression, oppression, and looting carried out by Japan. Language is one of the things that the Korean people fought for, because Japan, which at that time colonized the country, wanted to remove the Korean language and replace it with Japanese. Schools in Korea are even prohibited from learning Korean. The Korean people who resisted had only two choices: Death or Prison, but there was a group of people who tried to keep the original language by creating a Korean dictionary so that people could speak the appropriate language.

The March 1, 1919 Movement was an important milestone in the history of Korea's independence struggle. This movement not only changed the political landscape in Korea, but also influenced the national consciousness and spirit of resistance throughout the country. This movement inspired the next generation to continue the struggle against the colonizers and led to the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948. In the course of Korean history, the March 1 Movement remains respected and remembered as an important moment that marked the tireless initial efforts in achieving independence and defending the identity of the Korean nation. (Chae, 2016; Seth, 2023).

Previously, there was a study that reviewed the March 1 movement in Korea, namely a study written by Millati Sakina Adatima entitled *Japan's Annexation of Korea in 1910 – 1919 and the March 1 Movement (Samil Undong)* in this study explained more about the Japanese annexation in Korea and only explained a little about the March 1 movement in Korea. Furthermore, research from Mochamad Ikhsan entitled *The Role of the Samil Movement on the Rise of Korean Nationalism in 1919 – 1945* in his research explains the Samil movement of 1919 – 1945 to the impact that occurred, especially the rise of Korean nationalism. Then research from Amelia Isti Farhan entitled *South Korean Women in the Korean War* in her research explained the role of women in Korea from the events of the March 1 movement to the Korean War.

In this study, it is more focused on analyzing the events of the March 1 Movement in Korea as the first step in the effort for Korean independence. The benefits of this research are theoretically to enrich the historical perspective and can be a source of support regarding the learning of East Asian History in schools and universities. Practically it can be used as a reference to develop research in similar fields.

Method

The research method used in this article is the historical method or the historical method. The historical method or historical method is the process of testing and analyzing historical testimony to find authentic and reliable data (Gottschaalk, 1986). According to Sjamsuddin (2007), the historical method is a process of studying, explaining and critically analyzing past recordings and relics. Meanwhile, according to Ismaun (2005), the historical method is defined as the process of examining and testing records and relics of the past by critically analyzing the existing evidence and data so that it becomes a reliable historical story. According to Notosusanto in Sulasman (2014), the stages of historical method research are as follows: heuristic, source criticism, interpretation, presentation. It can be concluded that the historical method is the procedure or steps used to conduct research on the sources of past relics that are critically analyzed and presented based on facts. Furthermore, this research study is divided into 4 stages which include heuristic, verification, interpretation, and historiography (Kartodirdjo, 2017; Kuntowijoyo, 2013; Sulasman, 2014; Wasino & Hartatik, 2018) as follows:

1. Heuristic, where at this stage the researcher seeks to collect data from historical sources including information and information from scientific articles, books, and media during the Korean period (*The Steering Committee for the Commemoration of the March First Independence Movement and 100th Anniversary of the Provisional Government*).
2. Verification, at this stage, the researcher conducts internal verification regarding the historical sources surrounding the March 1 Movement in Korea that can be trusted. Then the researcher conducted external verification to prove the validity of the source of the March 1 Movement in Korea
3. Interpretation, where at this stage the researcher interprets historical data obtained from previously verified sources.

Historiography, where at this stage the researcher writes historical facts complete with an objective description of the topic of the problem being carried out.

Discussion

A. Background of the March 1, 1919 Movement

The March 1 Movement, often referred to as the Samil Movement or the Manse Demonstrations, was due to the repressive actions of the Japanese colonial government under the leadership of Terauchi Masatake, as governor general. Upon his arrival he was greeted with a murder plan. Terauchi responded by carrying out repressive acts, arresting 700 Koreans, 105 people were punished for their involvement and confessing their guilt (Seth, 2023). Another reason that led to this movement was President Woodrow Wilson's speech at the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919 explaining the "*Fourteen Points*" which contained the right to determine the fate of the people. After hearing the news of Wilson's speech, Korean students studying in Tokyo published a statement demanding freedom from colonialism. Coupled with the death of Emperor Gojong on January 21, 1919. The possibility that Emperor Gojong's death was poisoned by an unknown party (Wells, 1989; ch'oe, 2000; Hwang: 2010; Hwang: 2019).

The colonial government took no further risks, and the early years of their rule were a sustained reign of terror with tens of thousands of Koreans arrested, beaten, and tortured. Press freedom in Korea was restricted and supervised by the colonial government. Not only the press, education for Koreans is limited and only for a few years for basic education. This resulted in rising tensions that triggered a mass national uprising in 1919. In Tokyo on February 8, 1919, more than 600 Korean students attended a meeting where they issued a declaration calling for immediate independence. The group then sent its members to Korea to fight for independence there. At the same time in Korea, several different groups

were secretly discussing independence in early 1919. They include the leaders of the new religion Cheondogyo, a group of Presbyterians based in Pyongyang, the Methodists in Seoul, and a group affiliated with the Chungang high school, including two of Korea's most prominent businessmen. The arrival of the students and the news of the call for independence helped encourage these groups to act. Then there was the news of Gojong's death on January 21, 1919. Rumors circulated that he was poisoned by the Japanese or forced to commit suicide although there was no hard evidence to support either of these claims. But the news only added to tensions in Seoul as the city prepares for its funeral on March 3. Taking advantage of the large number of people expected to gather for the occasion, representatives of these groups decided to issue a declaration of independence in the Pagoda Park. in Seoul on March 1. Thirty-three people signed it: sixteen Christians, fifteen Cheondogyo, and two Buddhists. The plan was to send a petition to Japan and the U.S. government and the Paris peace conference (Masayuki, 2007; Eun: 2019).

The people who signed most of the religious leaders. They are careful to emphasize the nonviolent nature of their protests. They do not intend to incite a mass uprising. Concerned about safety, they decided to read out the declaration at a restaurant on February 28. After that, they plan to send out a measurable petition in hopes of making a reasonable and fair appeal for leaders in Tokyo, Washington, and Paris. But it sparked a national uprising, which resulted in thousands of people being killed and imprisoned. It happened the next day, on March 1, when someone had a copy and decided to read the declaration at a larger, peaceful meeting. News of the demonstration spread to several parts of Korea. In the next few weeks, it spread to every province and city, 90 percent of the 200 cities in Korea. It is estimated that there are three hundred to two million people participating, this is a very large number. In short, anti-imperialist demonstrations appeared throughout the non-Western world in 1919 in China, Egypt, India, the Philippines, and elsewhere. But nothing is on such a scale as in Korea, and it has never happened across the country and involves so many differences including students, farmers, entrepreneurs, and women (Seth, 2023).

B. The Events of the March 1, 1919 Movement

On March 1, 1919, 33 activists of the Samil Movement gathered at the Taehwagwan Restaurant in Seoul and read the Declaration of Independence. The activists had originally planned to gather at Seoul's Tapgol Park, but chose a more private location for fear the gathering could turn into a riot. The leaders of the movement signed the document and sent a copy to the Governor General. Korea also broadcast some objections to Wilson's speech on the principle of self-determination, the following points for the Japanese people to broadcast and hear through newspapers and media (Daeyeol, 2021):

1. The belief that the government will discriminate when hiring Koreans versus Japanese; they claim that no Korean holds an important position in the government.
2. There is a gap in education given to the people of Korea and Japan.
3. Japan acted violently against the Korean people.
4. Japanese and Korean political officials acted arrogantly.
5. There is no special treatment for educated people.
6. The administrative process is too complicated and the law is made to force the people.
7. There is forced labor that burdens the people
8. Taxes are too heavy.
9. The land was confiscated by the Japanese for personal reasons.
10. Korean teachers were forced to quit their jobs, because Japan tried to apply Japanese lessons.
11. Korea's development only benefits Japan while the Korean people do not benefit.

The demonstrators gathered in front of the Gyeongbok palace, the changdeok palace and the office of the Japanese Governor General where Japanese troops were on standby. Japan has no patience for Korean protesters and is unaware of the peaceful intentions of Korean protesters. Japan acted violently

to crack down on protesters who left thousands of Korean activists dead and injured (Deede, 2010). The March 1 Movement provided momentum for change for the Korean independence movement. The Japanese repression and arrest of activists resulted in the exodus of Korean leaders to Manchuria, Shanghai and other cities in China. The movement was a catalyst for the establishment of the provisional government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai in April 1919 and also influenced nonviolent resistance in India and several other countries. The Korean Liberation Army was also later formed and allowed to operate in China by the Chinese Government. The movement also saw an increase in the mobilization of Catholic and Protestant activists as well as activists mobilized in the US, China, and Russia (Wells, 1989; Wada, 2014).

The Japanese government responded to the March 1 Movement by stepping up its suppression of dissent and cracking down on the Movement, calling it a "Public Disturbance Incident" with Chosun Manse Violence. Governor General Hasegawa Yoshimichi accepted responsibility for the loss of control (although most of the repressive measures leading to the rebellion had been imposed by his predecessor) and was replaced by Saito Makoto. The military police were replaced by civilian forces, and limited press freedoms were allowed contained in the "cultural policy". Many of these policies did not work properly during the Second Sino-Japanese War and World War II (Wada, 2014)

C. Impact of the March 1, 1919 Korean Movement

The March 1, 1919 movement in Korea had a significant impact on the history of the struggle for independence and Korean nationalism. Here are some of the notable impacts of the movement:

1. **National Awareness Increase:** The March 1 Movement was an important moment in raising national awareness among the Korean people. Through broad participation from different walks of life, the movement unites Koreans from different regions and backgrounds in a spirit of unity. The Korean people began to realize the importance of maintaining their culture, language, and national identity that was threatened by Japanese colonialism.
2. **International Recognition:** The March 1 Movement drew international attention to Korea's independence struggle. News of the protests taking place across Korea spread abroad and gained sympathy from many countries. This helped to win international support and solidarity for the Korean independence struggle, as well as increase pressure on Japan diplomatically.
3. **Strengthening the Nationalist Movement:** The March 1 Movement became the trigger for the development and strengthening of the nationalist movement in Korea. The leaders and activists involved in this movement became the main figures in the subsequent struggle for Korean independence. This movement provided momentum and inspiration for the next generation to continue to fight against Japanese colonialism and fight for Korean independence.
4. **Repression and Acts of Repression:** Although this movement was supported by many Koreans, the Japanese colonial government responded harshly. They launched repressive measures to suppress the movement, including arrests, repression, and persecution of activists and movement leaders. This action led to numerous casualties, detentions, and torture of those involved in the movement.
5. **Change in Struggle Strategy:** The March 1 Movement brought about a change in the strategy of the Korean independence struggle. Leaders and activists began to adopt a more organized and systematic approach to resisting Japanese colonialism. They formed nationalist organizations, drafted independence manifestos, and developed a wider network of resistance. This movement inspired a more coordinated and effective effort to achieve Korean independence.
6. **Strengthening the Spirit of Struggle:** Although the March 1 Movement did not end Japanese occupation immediately, it strengthened the spirit of struggle of the Korean people. This event proved that the Korean people have the strength to unite and resist oppression, and are not afraid to sacrifice themselves for independence. This spirit and courage continued to burn the spirit of struggle for the next few decades until Korea's independence was achieved in 1945.

Overall, the March 1, 1919 Movement in Korea had a broad and profound impact on the struggle for Korean independence and nationalism. This movement aroused national awareness, gained international attention, strengthened the nationalist movement, experienced repression from Japan, brought about a change in the strategy of struggle, and solidified the spirit of the Korean people's struggle. These impacts continued to be felt until Korea achieved full independence in 1945 (Cumings, 2005; Cumings; 2011; Hanley, 2020).

Conclusion

The March 1 movement turned violent. This was not caused by the demonstrators but by the Japanese reaction. Panicked colonial security forces opened fire on the crowd, carried out mass arrests, and in one horrific case led demonstrators to a church and then set it on fire. Officially, 553 were killed, 1,409 were injured and more than 14,000 were arrested. Most likely this is too low a number. According to some estimates, 7,000 people died. Eventually, the demonstration was silenced. But it was a milestone in Korean history. The scale and breadth of the protest movement shows how much Koreans hate being under foreign rule.

It became the first movement of modern Korean nationalism. It is no longer a matter of a fair army defending the royal dynasty but the demonstrators are calling for something new, the modern Korean state. Korean intellectuals imitated new ideas about nations, and nation-states. With the March 1 Movement, Korean nationalism and its struggle to establish an independent modern Korean state shifted from a small discussion to a larger, popular one. Koreans today look proudly at the March 1 Movement, but there is something unfortunate that is, Koreans rarely unite as they did in 1919. While the aspiration to become a modern, autonomous, and advanced state is becoming almost universal, to achieve this will soon divide them.

A few years later, they were able to agree on this: that Koreans are one nation and that they must live in one independent and progressive country. But they can't agree on a way to achieve this and what it means to be progressive and modern. The impact of the March 1, 1919 Korean movement was; This movement aroused national awareness, gained international attention, strengthened the nationalist movement, experienced repression from Japan, brought about a change in the strategy of struggle, and solidified the spirit of the Korean people's struggle. These impacts continued to be felt until Korea managed to achieve full independence in 1945.

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