

Japanese Participation in the Korean War, 1950–1953

Through interpretation of historical facts on the Korean War, my study will consider the meaning of Japanese participation in the war by focusing on the Japanese government and individuals.

As is commonly known, the Korean War erupted as a kind of civil war between South and North Korea, the two battling with the special support of the US, the Soviet Union, and China. Therefore, Japan did not enter the war; thus, rightly, it was not concerned with the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement. The war was unrelated to the Japanese, but it provided them a golden opportunity for post-war Japan's economic revival; at least, this is the typical description in Japanese textbooks. However, new questions arise here: Was the Korean War really unrelated to the Japanese? Did Japan participate in the Korean War?

According to some recent studies, the answer for both these questions is “no.” In fact, Japanese participation in the Korean War has been known in academic and journalistic circles, and certain historical cases even reveal evidence. For instance, at the government level, the Japan Coast Guard was dispatched by order of the United Nations (UN) Command to the waters off Wonsan, North Korea, for minesweeping duty. During the mission, a Japanese coast guard officer died. His death is called as a first “fallen soldier” in post-war Japan. In another case, the UN Command's psychological warfare against North Korea was undertaken by order of the US Far East Command in cooperation with Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK or Japan Broadcasting Corporation). Moreover, the Japanese government provided logistic support to UN and US forces. On an individual level, A large number of LSTs with a Japanese crew transported ex-prisoners of war from a camp on Goje Island near Busan to Keelung, Taiwan. Additionally, according to my archival and oral history research, it is pointed out the possibility that some Japanese fought as soldiers of not only the South Korean army but also the North Korean and Chinese Volunteer armies.

My study aims to answer three questions. First, how did Japan enter the Korean War? Second, how did Japan's entry relate especially to Japanese colonial rule in Korea and to the Sino-Japanese War, the Asia-Pacific War, and the General Headquarters Supreme Command for Allied Powers (GHQ/SCAP) occupation? Third, what is the meaning of Japanese participation in the Korean War to the present Northeast Asia? By answering these research questions, this study will provide an opportunity to discuss the historical development and structure of Northeast Asia, with special attention to “competing imperialisms” during the Korean War.