[International Conference in Honor of the 80th Anniversary of the Liberation of Korea]

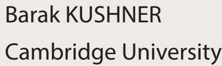
Searching for New Perspectives on Contemporary History of Korea: Rethinking Decolonization, Military Occupations, and the Ideas for a Democratic Korea

August 4-5 2025 / KCCI, Seoul

[Hosted by Northeast Asian History Foundation,
Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies (SNU), Institute of Social Sciences (SNU)]

Conference Proceeding

Victims of Victory: Power and Strategy in Postwar East Asia


Barak KUSHNER
Cambridge University

This paper investigates the complex legacy of Korean participation in the Japanese imperial military and their ambiguous status as both victims and perpetrators of imperial violence in the wake of World War II. I interrogate the postwar treatment of Korean individuals who served in or alongside Japanese forces, analyzing their fragile position within the shifting legal, military, and political frameworks of post-imperial East Asia. The central argument is that these individuals existed in a "grey zone" of historical responsibility, where colonial coercion and imperial complicity intersected, defying simple victim-perpetrator binaries.

I aim to emphasize how imperial legacies continue to shape regional memory and identity. My research looks to assess a less tangible, but no less enduring, imperial legacy: the Korean men who were militarized under Japanese rule later found themselves caught between collapsing empires, rising nationalist regimes, and the mechanisms for adjudicating postwar justice.

Despite the formal dissolution of the Japanese empire in 1945, the demobilization of its military apparatus generated new problems of accountability. Koreans and Taiwanese who had served the empire were of-

ten excluded from the primary war crimes trials, yet many were later prosecuted as B and C-class war criminals, particularly by the British and Australians. These individuals occupied a fraught legal status—neither fully Japanese (to be protected under Japanese legal sovereignty) nor fully independent actors (to be held solely responsible for their actions).

My presentation argues that the pursuit of justice in postwar East Asia was shaped not just by law, but by the political imperatives of emerging regimes. In Korea, the need to establish a functional police and military force often superseded concerns about collaboration. Many Korean ex-soldiers with Japanese training were quickly absorbed into the newly formed South Korean police and then the military. Ironically, possession of a Japanese military identity card often ensured employment. This paradox—where imperial experience became a qualification rather than a liability—illustrates the complex legacy of demobilization in the region.

I demonstrate how the legal and political fates of these individuals varied dramatically depending on geography. In Japan, Koreans were scapegoated in the aftermath of empire. The Yorii Incident of 1947, where Japanese mobs lynched Korean men, exemplifies how postwar violence echoed colonial hierarchies. In China, however, Koreans were seen as “secondary devils,” beneficiaries of Japanese aggression. Many were prosecuted by the KMT authorities for civilian torture, having served as interpreters for the *Kempeitai*, Japan’s military police. Recent access to Chinese trial transcripts reveals that these prosecutions were often grounded in substantial evidence of direct participation in acts of violence, despite the legal ambiguity surrounding their national identities.

Initially barred from military service, Koreans were only integrated into the armed forces when Japan’s manpower shortage became acute. Even then, their roles were mostly auxiliary—guards, laborers, or interpreters—though a few did rise to officer ranks, especially those trained in the Manchukuo Military Academy.

The chaos of imperial collapse created immense difficulties for repatriation and demobilization. Competing jurisdictions—the Soviets, Chinese Nationalists, and Chinese Communists—sought to control or

expel these remnants of empire. The Chinese government initially treated Korean soldiers as Japanese collaborators but eventually reclassified them as ethnic minorities eligible for naturalization. The Provisional Korean Government, meanwhile, attempted to reabsorb these militarized Koreans into a national army, though with limited success due to the disorder and conflicting allegiances of the time.

A key episode examined is the 1948 Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion in South Korea, where mutinous soldiers and the brutal government crackdown that followed revealed how colonial military habits and affiliations continued to influence violence in the postcolonial period. Some of the officers leading the repression wore Japanese uniforms or had served in the Japanese army, highlighting the lingering material and institutional legacy of empire.

Based on this discussion, I turn to the trials of Korean war criminals. Many were prosecuted in British and Australian courts for abuses against Allied POWs. In China, however, charges centered around the torture of civilians. Interpreters, in particular, were frequently tried for aiding Kempeitai interrogations. I look at several cases where Korean interpreters were found guilty of exceeding their duties and committing acts of torture. These cases complicate assumptions that Koreans were merely passive tools of the Japanese empire. Many were fluent in Japanese and Chinese, carried weapons, and operated with some level of autonomy.

However, the legal standing of these Korean war criminals remained ambiguous even after Japan regained sovereignty in 1952. A habeas corpus petition by Korean and Taiwanese prisoners at Sugamo Prison was rejected by Japan's Supreme Court, which ruled that they were still war criminals, despite no longer being Japanese citizens after the San Francisco Peace Treaty was promulgated. This legal contradiction—where Korean perpetrators were held accountable in ways that Japanese war criminals were not—speaks to the unresolved nature of colonial justice.

In the 21st century, South Korea has re-examined the status of these individuals. Commissions under President Roh Moo Hyun cleared

many Korean B and C-class war criminals, recasting them as victims of colonial mobilization. These actions reflect a growing sentiment in Korean civil society that collaboration under duress should not be equated with moral or legal guilt. Yet as historian Jie-Hyun Lim warns, this turn toward "victimhood nationalism" risks transforming individual perpetrators into collective victims, erasing the moral complexity of their actions.

I conclude that the experience of Koreans under Japanese imperialism challenges standard historical narratives about war responsibility. The roles they played—in China, Japan, and Korea—demand a more geographically based framework for understanding agency and complicity in colonial contexts. The binary of victim versus perpetrator collapses under scrutiny, replaced by a complex web of survival, coercion, and selective justice. This ambiguity continues to shape historical memory, diplomatic relations, and national identity in East Asia today.

Barak KUSHNER is a professor of East Asian history in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge. He has edited and written eight books, most recently The Geography of Injustice: East Asia's Battle between Memory and History (Cornell University Press, 2024). He also starred in an NHK documentary, In Deep with Ramen, which explores Japanese ramen from a historical perspective