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When Colonial Korea Met Fascism: *Power, Desire, and Adolf Hitler in Public Discourse, 1931–1945*

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Abstract

Beginning in the mid-1930s, and later as a member of the Axis Powers, imperial Japan allied with Nazi Germany and historians have extensively examined how the two countries viewed each other and what material and ideological conditions underpinned their alliance. However, researchers have paid little attention to colonial Korea's intersection with the fascist moment because Korea did not exist as an independent entity until Japan's defeat in World War II. This article explores how the public discourse of colonial Korea engaged with the politics of fascism, the varying influence of Adolf Hitler, and Japan's relationship with Nazi Germany. This essay investigates how different agents in colonial Korea, including the Japanese authorities, Korean leaders, and various print media, adopted, undercut, or opposed Japanese fascism by focusing on their shifting perspectives on totalitarian rule and the geopolitical situations in Europe and Asia. Because experiencing the discrepancy between the rhetoric of inclusive assimilation and its actual practice, Korean leftists, pro-Japanese intellectuals, and nationalist students appropriated fascist ideology regardless of their divergent political goals. These Korean elites tried to bridge that divide by embracing the fascist will to power, a move that led some to seek domination and elevate their status within the imperial structure and others to defy it.

Keywords: colonial Korea, Japanese Empire, Adolf Hitler, Nazism, fascism

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Introduction

On March 25, 1933, Nazi Germany passed the Enabling Act (Ermächtigungsgesetz), which paved the way for Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) to solidify his dictatorial authority. In a prescient move one year earlier, the moderate nationalist newspaper of colonial Korea (1910–1945), *Dong-A Ilbo* (East Asia Daily), expressed concern about the radical nature and rapid development of Hitler's political ambitions: "The National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) stands at the forefront of the anti-Soviet crusade and hoists a strange tricolor flag of nationalism, socialism, and anti-Semitism." It continued, "What will the future of Hitler's movement be like?...Will the fascisization of Germany stop if France rectifies its attitude? It seems too late. Hitler's power has already expanded out of control" (*Dong-A Ilbo* 1932). Watching from the other side of the globe, these newspaper editors were correct to fear the trouble brewing in Germany as Nazism quickly gained ascendency after Hitler was appointed chancellor. Within a strikingly short period of time, his totalitarian leadership extended its hold over most Germans and threatened the world order established by the Treaty of Versailles.

Beginning in the 1930s, and later as a member of the Axis Powers, Nazi Germany allied with Imperial Japan, and historians have extensively examined how the two countries perceived each other and what material and ideological conditions supported their alliance (Brooker 1991; Meskill 2012; Nish 2020; Yellen 2019). Many scholars explain that fascism in both Germany and Japan originated from their shared status as latecomers to imperialist competition—the so-called "have-not" states—which resulted in their international isolation and conflicts with the Allies (Gregor 1979; Sottile 2004; Young 2017). Several recent studies concentrate on the aesthetic and cultural manifestations of fascism in wartime Japan and its intellectual exchanges with other fascist nations (Harootunian 2000; Hofmann 2015; Tansman 2009a, 2009b). While academic attention has been riveted on the Japanese Empire in the history of global fascism, researchers have overlooked how colonial Korea intersected with the *fascist moment* because it did not exist as an independent entity until Japan's defeat in World War II.

Only a few scholars have explored Koreans' experiences of Japanese fascism by focusing on Korean elites' views of fascist Japan (J. Kim 2022; Poole 2014; Yi 2010), legacies of Japan's totalitarian rule over Korea (Bang 2006), and everyday life under Japan's fascist policies (Bang 2004).

Among the diverse aspects of imperial fascism that engulfed colonial Korean society—extreme statism, anti-communism, hyper-militarism, and anti-capitalist rhetoric—this article highlights how the cult of personality built around Hitler operated to mobilize and discipline Koreans into certain modes of behavior for Japan's colonial enterprise.[1] As a primary subject of intellectual discussion, Hitler loomed large in newspapers and magazines in colonial Korea, engendering a range of responses from feelings of veneration to skepticism to aversion. Koreans interpreted Hitler and his fascist politics differently according to their political orientations and goals. Despite envisioning a future through the paradigm of fascism and its associated dynamics of violence, Koreans came to disparate conclusions about how they should act. This study thus probes how the Japanese colonial regime, Korean elites, and various print media understood Hitler and his totalitarianism. It also investigates how their views changed in concert with shifts in Japan's assimilation policy, Hitler's status as an authoritarian ruler,

1. I consider fascism an ideology that promotes a collective sense of unity to foster social control based on an invented/(re)discovered national mythology and, more broadly, a network of activities that fuels the spread of that ideology, including state propaganda, surveillance, censorship, and the everyday language of popular media. Roger Griffin and Zeev Sternhell argue that Nazism cannot be treated as a mere variant of fascism, though they are closely interlinked, because they originated and evolved in different historical contexts (Sternhell 1987, 148). Paul Gottfried notes that the tendency in academia to equate fascism with Nazism has prevented a precise understanding of these two disparate political concepts (Gottfried 2016, 1–2). Despite these differences, as Dave Renton explains, Griffin and Sternhell affirm that both Nazism and fascism were driven by the nationalist impulse, a significant aspect of an "ideal" fascist type they developed by extracting common features from different fascist movements (Renton 1999, 21–22). While acknowledging the shared experiences and different manifestations of the two ideologies in modern times, I use Nazism to refer to the specific case of fascism in Germany under Hitler's dictatorship and employ fascism to indicate the larger totalitarian system or the international political order that produced the specific conditions under which Nazism arose.

and the Japanese-German relationship amidst the escalating global crisis following the Great Depression.

I argue that while liberal writers questioned fascism, the Japanese Government-General of Korea (GGK) and state-controlled press leveraged Hitler as the symbolic embodiment of the ultra-nationalist mission to reinforce their ruling hegemony and, furthermore, that some Koreans internalized the fascist *will to power* in an endeavor to improve their status within the colonial hierarchy or to undermine imperial power and reinstate Korean sovereignty. These divergent interpretations and uses of Hitler reflect colonial agents' disparate political motives, demonstrating how *dōka*, or Japan's assimilation policies—as embodied in the euphemistic slogan *naisen ittai* (Japan and Korea as one body) or the wartime goal of constructing the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere—remained unfulfilled even when the GGK implemented fascist (or totalitarian) rule over the colonized between the late 1930s and 1945.

As Alan Tansman observes, fascism sprung from attempts to "counter the alienation and fragmentation of the modern individual" and "promised an end to class division" by advancing the "natural" bonds of the blood and spirit of a nation (Tansman 2009b, 3). Yet for the colonized, contradictions between the ideal and reality were inherent in imperial Japan's efforts to address those *ills of modernity*: the national/racial hierarchy persisted between *naichijin* (Japanese mainlanders) and *gaichijin* (colonial subjects), thus negating the promise of harmonious integration. This paper traces how Koreans tried to bridge that divide by embracing the fascist logic of power, a move that led some to seek domination within the imperial structure and others to defy it. This study illuminates how colonial Korea engaged in transnational fascism at the intersection between the Axis Powers—notably, Japan and Germany—and reveals the inextricable link between colonial discourse and the sociopolitical realities of that era.

Hitler Gains Attention in the Public Discourse of Colonial Korea during the Early 1930s

The catastrophic impact of the Great Depression was so far-reaching because a global capitalist system linked most of the world. The abrupt collapse of the international economy sparked widespread sociopolitical turmoil. The Weimar Republic (1918–1933) could not prevent soaring unemployment—5.5 million Germans, over 30 percent of the workforce, were unemployed in 1932—and embraced measures that instigated hyperinflation. The result was an environment ripe for Nazism to spring up as a nationwide grassroots movement (Griffin 1993, 97). Meanwhile in Japan, technofascists and far-right military leaders began "destroying the institutional foundations of parliamentary democracy"; they thought that party cabinets were too corrupt and incompetent to solve the pressing problems of the day (Woodall 2014, 69–70). As a Japanese colony, Korea could not avoid being drawn into Japan's travails since it shared labor and rural issues with the metropole due to an imperial order. The post-World War I recession inflicted severe pain on industrial workers and tenant farmers, causing disputes to erupt with employers and landlords and worsening in the early 1930s.

In this era of heightening crisis, the power of the Japanese military and ultra-nationalists grew swiftly, as evidenced by the Kwantung Army's invasion of Manchuria in September 1931 and the assassination of key government officials the following year, including Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi (1855–1932).[2] Such actions signaled Japan's first step toward fascism based on hyper-militarism (Young 2017, 275) and alerted Korean intellectuals to Japan's affiliation with European fascist countries. In February 1932, over a dozen Korean elites responded to a query from the liberal monthly literary journal *Samcheolli* (Three Thousand Leagues): "Will

2. Spearheaded by military officers who viewed themselves as loyal to the emperor rather than subordinate to the civilian government, the "Blood Pledge League" had also executed the former finance minister Inoue Junnosuke (1869–1932) and the head of the Mitsui zaibatsu Dan Takuma (1858–1932) before joining army cadres in the coup attempt.

Japan turn towards [fascist] dictatorship?" A few disagreed, but most responses anticipated that Japan would soon align itself with international fascism. One of the contributors, socialist writer Kim Janghwan (1902–?), wrote: "The world is now…entering a reactionary phase. In Germany, Hitler's National Socialist Party, nicknamed the Brown Party, has occupied the parliament and army." He continued: "Just as the Japanese adopted German civilization during the Meiji restoration, they will learn again from [Nazi] Germany." Another respondent, the communist activist Yi Yeoseong (1901–?), agreed, "Global capitalism will inevitably perish…There will be a military-led dictatorship [at the end of the path that] Japan has taken… Eventually, a Japanese Hitler will appear" (*Samcheolli* 1932, 3). The charismatic appeal and increasing influence of Hitler, as well as Japan's accelerating imperial aggression, led these critics to fear that Korea would soon be in peril from the expanding fascist threat.

For Korean liberal and Marxist intellectuals, Hitler's Nazism represented a dangerous and unprecedented political phenomenon that demanded total subordination of the individual to the national body politic to accelerate capitalist accumulation and expansion. The communist journalist Kim Myeongsik (1890–1943) was one of the earliest writers in colonial Korea who analyzed and published on Hitler's one-party fascist totalitarianism when he subverted the Weimar Constitution in March 1933. From a Marxist standpoint, Kim condemned Hitler on moral and ideological grounds and exposed the contradictions within Nazism.

> The Nazis' totalitarianism is a nickname for German nationalism, so there is no difference between these two. Founded on the controlled economy of finance capitalism, the Nazis kept the people ignorant and reinforced their monopolistic dictatorship. When the Nazis claim that they serve all rather than the individual or the class, that all actually refers to a small number of exploitative capitalists, so we should not be fooled. If finance capitalists establish the controlled economy and such a totalitarian system thrives, the whole society will inevitably fall into the hands of those finance capitalists. (M. Kim 1936, 53)

Kim asserted that the essence of the Nazis' totalitarianism lay in the controlled economy in which only a few finance capitalists held exclusive power and dominated society in the name of the whole. For Kim, the Nazis reinforced their monopolistic dictatorship by controlling the economic system in collusion with greedy capitalists and keeping the people ignorant. Other Marxist critics who worked for the leftist press during these years widely shared this view. Especially, the editors of the *Joseon Jungang Ilbo* (Korean Central Daily) were most visible in revealing the connection between the Nazis and capitalists. In many editorials, they critiqued fascism as contradictory and even deceptive since it claimed to adopt socialist tenets and fulfill labor demands, while on the contrary serving capitalists and defending their accumulation of wealth. They denounced, "Nazism imitates socialism but endorses capitalism and relies on its working organization. It pretends to advocate the well-being of the workers; however, it eventually seeks to protect the capitalists." The editors concluded that building a harmonious capitalist-socialist society was just an empty promise by the Nazis; consequently, during Germany's disastrous political and economic crisis of the early 1930s, Hitler "resorted to extreme psychological methods and imposed on the German population rigorous discipline, patience, and submission because he could not resolve the problem of mass unemployment and poverty through his administrative programs" (*Joseon Jungang Ilbo* 1933).

Socialist attacks on Nazism (or more broadly, fascism) happened earlier in Germany, Italy, and other parts of Europe during the early 20th century. Even before Hitler pledged to create a greater Third Reich, as Robert O. Paxton aptly notes, Marxists "were ready with a definition of fascism as the instrument of the big bourgeoisie for fighting the proletariat when the legal means available to the state proved insufficient to subdue them" (Paxton 2005, 8). After the outbreak of World War I and the Great Depression, Marxists' anti-fascist position became more salient; they conceived of the crisis of capitalism—the inability to assure ever-expanding markets, the worsening competition for natural resources and labor, the global imbalance of supply and demand—as the seabed of fascism. In 1934, the Russian Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) wrote that the basic feature

Figure 1. Illustration from *Joseon Jungang Ilbo*. Caption reads: "Freedom of the press, publication, and speech is trampled under the hooves of Hitler's dictatorship"

Source: *Joseon Jungang Ilbo* (September 20, 1934).

of capitalism's disintegration process is the same everywhere: "The bourgeoisie leads its society to complete bankruptcy." For Trotsky, because the bourgeoisie possesses the means of production and maintains its hegemony as the ruling force of capitalism, fascism inevitably arises, "smash[es] the working class, destroy[s] its organizations, and stifle[s] political liberties when the capitalists find themselves unable to govern and dominate with the help of democratic machinery" (Trotsky 1968, 8).

The world would need to defeat capitalism in that it begets fascism. However, for Korean Marxists, "nation" (and nationalists—especially the moderate group) was a more complicated matter. In particular, when Nazism and Japanese totalitarianism escalated during the mid-1930s, Korean leftists oscillated between the strategic alliance with and opposition to Korean nationalists. For Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, national sentiment and awareness were *reflections* of the productive base of society rooted in contradictory relations. They represented a reactionary ideology manufactured by the ruling class intended to distort or justify processes of capitalist exploitation. Lenin agreed with his two predecessors in

understanding the nation as a transient, ephemeral phenomenon on the trajectory toward a socialist revolution. However, as James Gregor mentions, "Lenin saw the issue of nationalism as of fundamental importance for Russia of his time" (Gregor 2008, 168). Although any endeavor to foster and sustain national peculiarities were "retrograde" and "counter-revolutionary," Lenin recognized the role of the colonized in leading a mass uprising to seize state power and attain the proletarian dictatorship. For Koreans under colonial domination, incongruence between the *state* and the *nation* had been a problematic structural framework that had conditioned their lives since annexation in 1910. Before total imperialization (*kōminka*) overtook colonial life after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937, the nation and its people remained "Korean," rather than being subsumed into the "greater Yamato (Japanese) race," unless one willingly collaborated with the colonial authorities (Tikhonov 2012, 975). Under these circumstances, the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern held in Moscow in July 1935 issued a resolution that allowed "Korean communists [to] return to the united front strategy" (Shin 2006, 75). The Popular Front—the new policy announced by the Bulgarian communist leader Georgi Dimitrov (1882–1949)—demanded that communists ally with any political parties to counter the global expansion of fascist power. No Korean Marxists accepted the decision immediately because it contrasted with the earlier December Thesis, which had ordered communists to take a hardline approach to nationalists. Refusing to join moderate nationalists' Movement to Revitalize Korean Studies (Joseonhak undong), many Korean Marxist scholars, including Sin Namcheol (1907–?) and Kim Taejun (1905–1949), criticized the nationalist promotion of Dangun, a mythical progenitor of Korean history, and ideas of Korean cultural particularism, such as *Joseoneol* (spirit of Korea) and *Joseonsim* (heart of Korea).

However, some Korean Marxist historians like Baek Namun (1894–1979) acknowledged the usefulness of nationalist appeal to the colonized and found the anti-Japanese struggle for independence beneficial in fomenting a socialist revolution. Baek participated in the Joseonhak undong and underscored that Korea was "a unitary nation with common blood, territory, language, culture, historical destiny for a thousand years, which is

exceptional in world history" (Shin 2006, 76). That blind spot—a tendency not to thoroughly separate nationalism and fascism under colonial conditions—distinguished Korean leftists from their Japanese socialist counterparts, such as Tosaka Jun (1900–1945), who condemned Japanese fascism—what he called "Japanese ideology" (*Nihon ideorogiiron*) or "Japanism" (*Nihonshugi*)—and considered it part of "the general international situation" propelled by nationalist impulses originating in various places. As Reto Hofmann notes, "Tosaka assumed that fascism was globally consistent but locally diverse," and that its different monikers, "such as Pan-Asianism, the "kingly way" (ōdō), or national socialism…were all constituent parts of *Nihonshugi*" (Hofmann 2015, 73).

The Fascisization of Public Discourse and Korean-German Interactions in the Late 1930s

In February 1936, when Hitler's plan to conquer Europe and transform German society into a pure racial community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) was becoming more evident, the literary magazine *Samcheolli* posed the question, "What will you do if you travel abroad?" Surprisingly, a majority of the 23 respondents, most of whom were educators and writers, said they hoped to meet with Hitler. Perhaps that was out of journalistic curiosity, but some genuinely admired Hitler. One respondent called him "the heart of the world today," while others praised him as "the savior of the [German] nation" or "an extraordinarily glorious man" (*Samcheolli* 1936, 10–13). Six months earlier, the media referred to Hitler as a hero for the first time publicly in colonial Korea. Ju Eunseong, the author of several bestselling booklets, including *Yeolhyeol cheongnyeon* (On the Passionate Youth, 1935) and *Dongbang-ui sinisang* (The New Ideal of the Orient, 1938), published short articles in which he called for recognition of leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini. He asserted, "Since the birth of mankind…history is the traces left by heroes and great men…Hitler declared…'I will be the savior of Germany and save this country with my unstained hands.'" Ju continued, "[His] speech and behavior can mesmerize the world" (*Samcheolli* 1935,

111–113). For Ju, who later contributed to Japan's wartime effort because he considered it his solemn duty to the empire, Hitler was the epitome of patriotism whom all colonial youth should emulate.

Moderate and right-wing Korean nationalists who were fascinated by Hitler and his authoritarian stance sought to imitate him in a bid to revitalize Korean sovereignty, employing terms like "hero," "will," and "power" to describe him, loaded expressions that had problematic ideological underpinnings. As Andre Schmid notes, Social Darwinism, a popular doctrine in nineteenth-century East Asia, "was considered spatially and temporally universal…[as] the inviolate laws of human society…[and it encompassed] hierarchies of nations…that neatly overlapped with those of civilization" (Schmid 2002, 37–38). During the colonial era, Social Darwinism was still regarded as a valid analytical lens through which Korean intellectuals could view themselves and others. According to its logic, Germany, despite its earlier travails, was a successful nation that had overcome all adversaries and triumphed in the struggle of the "survival of the fittest." Essential to that achievement were Hitler's courage, resolution, and, above all, oratory skills. People believed his speech to be "something absolutely attractive to an audience" (*Donggwang* 1931, 22); he was praised as a "superbly gifted" orator (*Samcheolli* 1938, 125) with "a flawless eloquence that amazed anyone who heard it" (Ju 1936, 70).

Unrestrained reverence for Hitler's audacity and political brilliance, coupled with antisemitic prejudice, motivated such authors to perceive Germany's rule over the Jews and other ethnic minorities as justifiable. Assuming that the Jewish character was irretrievably problematic, many even believed Jews were to blame for that domination. For instance, the editors of the *Dong-A Ilbo* wrote, "The Jews have been drifting from home since the city of Jerusalem fell almost 2,000 years ago. They have suffered severely from suppression and ostracization in France, Russia, and Germany." Then they asked, "Why have the 13 million Jews wandered so far without having their own state?" They purported to find the answer in the Jews' distinctive cultural traits, an essentializing gaze that led to an absurd conclusion: Jews "support marriage between men and women from the same family lineage, remain superstitious, and disrespect other cultures…

[They] are being oppressed by Hitler's government because of their biased [ideas] and the superstitious ways of life embedded in their very character" (*Dong-A Ilbo* 1933). Considering their plight as oppressed colonial subjects, one might have expected these Korean elites to identify with victims of German persecution, but nationalist impulses and antisemitism, as well as their Social Darwinist worldview, forestalled such empathetic identification. As a result, Korean proponents of Nazism glossed over and excused Germany's anti-Jewish aggression—until they learned about the Holocaust after liberation.

Support for Nazism gradually outstripped its opposition in colonial Korea when Japan expanded its sphere of influence by waging war against China in 1937 and tightened its grip on public media. The GGK played a vital role in encouraging interest in Nazism throughout the peninsula, even though it carefully refrained from officially singling out Hitler for praise lest that action deflect attention from the emperor. Within the Japanese Empire, only the emperor, as a deity-incarnate whose divinity guaranteed the legitimacy of Japan's *kokutai* (national polity), should be glorified and no other entity—person, object, or deity—rivaled his exalted stature (Shimazono and Murphy 2009, 107–112). But the *Maeil Sinbo* (Daily Newspaper), now a mouthpiece for the GGK, was allowed more leeway: it extolled Hitler as colonial Korea's foremost ally, who was "tied in blood" (*hyeolmaeng*) to Koreans and whose charismatic leadership would motivate Koreans to cultivate a spirit of solidarity and sacrifice to the empire.

That unreservedly positive assessment contrasts sharply with previous criticism of Hitler by the *Maeil Sinbo*. Just a few years earlier, its editors had admonished Nazi Germany, declaring, "the Nazis restrict employment opportunities for women and treat them so badly." They further cast doubt on the sustainability of Hitler's regime because "it stifles freedom of speech…[and] exploits conquered nations" (*Maeil Sinbo* 1933). Then a series of pivotal events—the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact in October 1936; Germany's recognition of Japan's puppet state Manchukuo in February 1938; and German renunciation of its claims to its former colonies in Southeast Asia now held by Japan—transformed this newspaper's narrative from criticism to appreciation. This dramatic shift did not ignore genuine

tensions and conflicts between Germany and Japan throughout the war, but indicated the editors' strategic use of Hitler as an inspirational force who could bolster wartime mobilization. Ricky W. Law observes that "Germany was given chances to make news in Japan almost daily so that it never strayed far from the Japanese public consciousness" (Law 2019, 64). In colonial Korea, the *Maeil Sinbo* also enthusiastically reported every detail about Hitler—from his childhood to his family lineage to his distaste for liquor and smoking—positioning him at the center of interactions between imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and colonial Korea.

The 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin helped cement ties between these three allies. Son Gijeong (1912–2002), a Korean long-distance runner, participated as a member of the Japanese delegation and won the gold medal in the marathon. After the race, he briefly met with Hitler, who was awaiting him at the podium. In the heat of the moment, Son greeted Hitler with a Nazi salute and Hitler patted him on the back, congratulating him on his victory (*Samcheolli* 1940, 55–56). Valorized upon his return to Korea, Son attracted numerous press interviews. Two years later, he was the honored guest at the Korean premiere of the 1938 Nazi propaganda sports film by Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2002), *Olympia: Festival of Nations*, chronicling the Berlin Olympics, where he shared his experiences with a rapt audience. Son's lively personal testimony and the dynamic visual medium of film brought Hitler to life for Koreans as no previous media representation had. Hitler was now no longer an imaginary figure but a vivid reality. After watching this film, some Koreans felt that Hitler was just a regular person, not a cold-blooded killer or vile dictator. One woman gushed, "I have been thinking of Hitler as if he were a [lifeless]…stone. But I became really interested in him and realized he was a man like anyone else because he had a different look when female athletes appeared in the stadium." Another woman responded positively to Hitler's childlike enthusiasm: "When a German athlete fell behind in the race, [Hitler] was constantly moving up and down and scratching his knees unconsciously. He looked just like a child" (*Samcheolli* 1940, 50–55).

Such portrayals humanized Hitler in the minds of colonized Koreans, but he had already fostered a sympathetic image by sending relief funds to

Korean flood victims in October 1936. One week before signing the Anti-Comintern Pact, Hitler ordered the German consul stationed in Dalian, China, to visit Keijō (Seoul) and deliver humanitarian aid to the Governor-General of Korea, Minami Jirō (1874–1955). Deeply impressed by Hitler's generosity, Minami expressed his profound gratitude and enthusiastically encouraged the Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth) to make a trip to Korea, which he believed would enhance cultural interaction between colonial Korea and Nazi Germany (*Chosun Ilbo* 1936). The first opportunity for such a visit came in August 1938, when a group of Hitlerjugend traveled to Tokyo. The GGK "desperately hoped that they would change their itinerary and drop by Keijō," but they limited their stay to Japan before returning to Germany in early November (*Maeil Sinbo* 1938).

This disappointment was reversed two years later. After lengthy negotiations, the colonial authorities finally prevailed in convincing the Hitlerjugend leadership to visit Korea on their way to Japan via Manchuria. The editors of the *Maeil Sinbo* were elated, exclaiming that it was "a truly historical exchange" (*Maeil Sinbo* 1940a). The Hitlerjugend delegation led by Heinrich Jürgens, the director of the Far East Department of the German Youth Ministry and the head of the Germany-Japan Youth Exchange Program, arrived at the Keijō train station on October 23, 1940, where a large crowd and brass band warmly greeted them.

Among those welcoming them was Kang Sehyeong (1899–1960), who studied at the Free University of Berlin between 1931 and 1935, where he received a doctorate in philosophy. In Germany, Kang became deeply interested in the Hitlerjugend and interacted with its leader, Baldur Benedikt von Schirach (1907–1974). As the principal of the Japan-Germany Cultural Association, Kang gave lectures on the Nazis, introducing their organizational structure and thought to Koreans. In 1946, after the liberation of Korea, he helped create the anti-communist, ultra-nationalist Korean Youth Corps modeled after the Hitlerjugend. As one of the greatest advocates of Nazism, Kang even supported the sterilization law (enacted in Germany in July 1933) to preserve the nation's purity (J. Kim 2022, 277). Kang believed that German fascism was an ideal political ideology that colonized Koreans should adopt to transform themselves into the Japanese

emperor's loyal subjects. During the six Hitlerjugend representatives' visit to Korea, Kang also guided them to meet with Governor-General Minami (*Maeil Sinbo* 1940a).

Minami hosted a grand welcoming party for the Hitlerjugend where he gave a speech, emphasizing: "The German spirit of chivalry and that of Japanese Bushidō correspond to each other; the former upholds Chancellor Hitler, and the latter unites the 100 million subjects before the Japanese Emperor. They both highlight the value of self-sacrifice for the larger public good. It is very meaningful for these two countries to form a solid alliance" (*Maeil Sinbo* 1940b). Due to media suppression, the pro-government *Maeil Sinbo* was the only major newspaper left in colonial Korea, so it monopolized coverage of the momentous visit of the Hitlerjugend. *Maeil Sinbo* reporters eagerly followed the Germans' every move, including their

Figure 2. Welcoming ceremony for the Hitlerjugend delegation at the Keijō train station. Caption reads: "The dramatic exchange with the young delegates from our blood-ally—the arrival of the Hitlerjugend"

Source: *Maeil Sinbo* (October 24, 1940).

visit to the Keijō Museum and their overnight trip to the renowned Diamond Mountains.

The GGK and its megaphones in the press employed the Hitlerjugend visit to Korea as a propaganda spectacle to inculcate youngsters and all other imperial subjects with the concepts of discipline and obedience to authority. The *Maeil Sinbo* issued fervent calls to contribute to the empire's wartime efforts along with stories about the Hitlerjugend—its history, women's role in the organization, and its members' unswerving devotion to the Nazis. Furthermore, the *Maeil Sinbo* editors asserted that the imposition of a strict daily regimen, the militarization of everyday life, and, in particular, the awakening of the "German soul" were essential to Nazi Germany's success. This claim implied that only the collective efforts of its leaders and citizens could build a strong nation and that Koreans, as an integral part of Japan's empire-building, should learn from and model themselves after the disciplined dedication of the Hitlerjugend.

The ideology underlying the GGK-led drive for national mobilization on the peninsula was aimed at negating the modern alienation of the individual and redefining the purpose of every colonial subject into serving the Japanese emperor as the supreme leader, just as the Hitlerjugend devoted themselves unconditionally to Hitler. From late 1938 onward, the prolonged war in China caused grave shortages of food, natural resources, and other supplies. That situation, along with the implementation of a volunteer draft, prompted the GGK to stress self-sacrifice for the communal national cause over the needs of mere individuals within colonial society. Moreover, as Japan and Germany reinforced their military alliance against the Allied Powers, colonized Koreans were inextricably drawn, willingly or not, into direct contact with transnational fascism. It is within this fraught global political context that many Koreans internalized a desire for power and domination during the late colonial period.

Divergent Desires for Power: Internalizing Fascist Tenets in the Late 1930s and 1940s

The deteriorating situation in Japan's ongoing war with China, which sapped imperial supplies and personnel, and the growing need for more resources as the empire expanded into Southeast Asia and the Pacific strained Japanese hegemony. Further, it exposed its inherent contradictions, that of the allegedly equal status of the colonized, which belied the hierarchical national/racial divide on the peninsula. Fundamentally, colonialism operates on a stratified relationship that privileges the colonizer over the colonized and relies on discrimination and exploitation to function properly (Mbembe 2001, 29). But this oppressive colonial condition was seriously challenged by Japan's total war effort because the urgency of that military enterprise required the ideological and industrial mobilization of the entire population, both the colonizer and the colonized. Expected to risk their lives in Japan's war, Koreans (*gaichijin*) demanded, in return for that ultimate sacrifice, social and political rights equal to those of the Japanese (*naichijin*).

It was not only Koreans who wanted equality: the Japanese authorities continued to make political overtures that embraced Koreans as equal citizens of the empire. For example, in a radio speech in October 1935 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of annexation, Governor-General Ugaki Kazushige (1868–1956) said, "I am pleased that the gap between the two peoples has gradually disappeared as they grow closer every year…[Soon] the Japanese and Koreans will be fully united. Upon reaching that stage, the peninsular people (*hantojin*), as the empire's equal subjects, will wield their power and spread their fame just the same as their Japanese compatriots" (Chōsen sōtokufu 1935, 55–57). That tantalizing promise of equality remained empty rhetoric until almost the end of the Pacific War, when the Japanese cabinet granted a limited number of Koreans "the right to vote for and send representatives to the national Diet through two laws promulgated on April 1, 1945"—Law No. 34 and Imperial Ordinance No. 193 (Fujitani [2011] 2013, 64–75). Yet these laws were too little too late: Japan surrendered to the Allies before new elections could take place (Morris-Suzuki 2008, 15).

Since electoral reform came much too late, colonial subjects could only

enhance their position within the imperial hierarchy through military service. Some pro-Japanese Korean elites applauded the GGK's decision made in 1943 to draft Koreans into the Japanese military.

> On August 1, the government will finally implement the conscription system for which 25 million Koreans have long waited. Now the day for young Koreans to become soldiers of the empire has arrived…The military draft, a great honor that also confers prestige, extends to the Korean people…Koreans can now play an important part in the construction of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere…This decision [to extend the military draft to Korea] enables us to advance to the glorious position as the leader [with Japan] of Greater East Asia. We are deeply grateful [to the emperor] once again for granting us this prestigious opportunity. (*Jogwang* 1942, 180)

The extension of the military draft to Korea was meaningful to those who supported it because it produced loyal imperial subjects and held out the possibility of raising their status to become leaders within Asia under the slogan *naisen ittai*. This desire for elevation within the colonial hierarchy, illustrated in the passage above, prompted Koreans to become conscripts in Japan's war effort and thereby set themselves above other nations and ethnic groups in the region. Although these two goals seemed contradictory, calls for advancing Korean national status within the imperial order through participation in the war appeared most often in public discourse when colonial Korea was drawn into the vortex of transnational fascism.

Yi Gwangsu (1892–1950), the pioneer of modern Korean literature, was one of many Korean elites who openly supported the enforcement of conscription in the colony because he believed that the new policy would reinforce Korea's role within the empire and accelerate assimilation. Yi declared, "[By working with the Japanese] to establish the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, Koreans will become the host, leader, and master of all Asian nations." Then he asked, "Have we ever had such a grandiose mission in our history before? We can obtain this extraordinary position only by submitting to the emperor's [will]. Now is a perfect time" (G. Yi [1941] 1976, 152). Since the early 1920s, Yi had admired "Il Duce" Benito

Mussolini (1883–1945)—Yi considered Mussolini "one of the three greatest figures in today's history" along with Lenin and Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925). Hoping Koreans might learn about fascism as it began to dominate Europe in the early 1930s, Yi was the first to translate Hitler's *My Struggle* (*Mein Kampf*) into Korean. Despite the dire reality in colonial Korea, Yi expressed in newspaper editorials his aspirations for a powerful nation. Praising war as an embodiment of the conflicting nations' might, he believed that the logic of power drives the world. However, in his eyes, Koreans remained "the nameless people who lack the power of body, bone, and soul" (G. Yi [1931] 1976, 279). Accordingly, Yi saw Japan's war in Southeast Asia and the Pacific

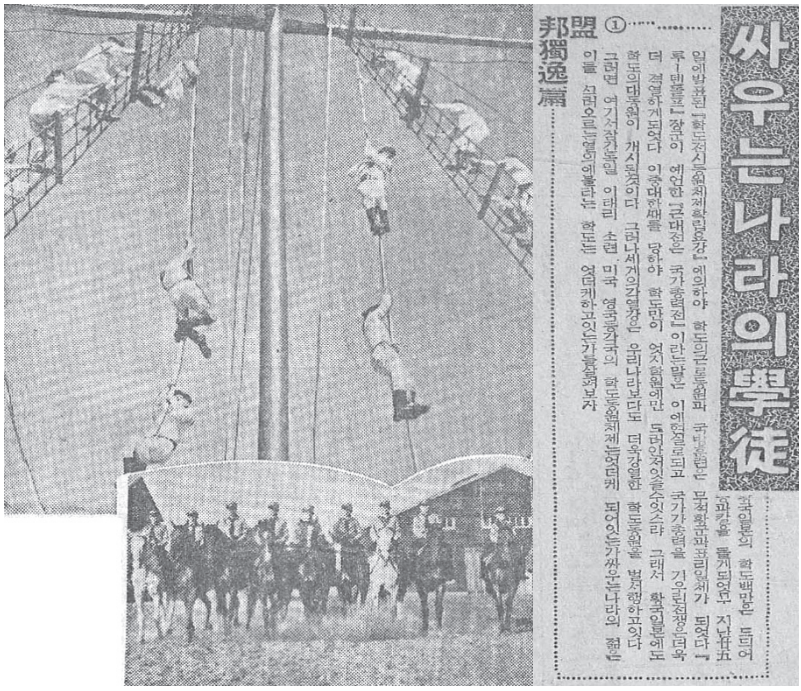

Figure 3. Hitlerjugend engaged in athletic training. Caption reads: "Students from a fighting country"

Source: *Maeil Sinbo* (July 4, 1943).

as a golden opportunity for Koreans to demonstrate their values and loyalty to the emperor. Therefore, he urged Korean youth to join the war: "The most valuable act [for an individual] is to commit suicide for the command and honor…A man of loyalty refers to the one who dies for the nation at war… Dying for the nation is the utmost happiness one can enjoy" (G. Yi [1941] 1995, 259–262). Emphasizing the "honorable" sacrifice, Yi defined one's death for the whole (nation) as the noblest moment of life. Yi's *fascist worldview*—denying the individual's dignity and pursuing totalitarian interests instead—manifested his desire for power that he had internalized through his experience with colonial hierarchy (Kwak 2008, 443).

At the height of Japan's territorial expansion, the ex-communist *ideological converts*, or *tenkōsha*, further complicated the discursive landscape of fascism in colonial Korea. They endorsed the theory of the "Asian cooperative body" (*Tōa kyōdōtai*, hereafter *kyōdōtai*)—a new order proposed in the summer of 1938 by the Shōwa Kenkyūkai (Showa Research Association) under the Japanese philosopher Miki Kiyoshi (1897–1945) to help Japan break through the stalemate and international isolation in China. The famous Korean *tenkōsha* Seo Insik (1905–?) upheld the *kyōdōtai*, seeking a way to reconcile totalitarianism with individual freedom through that project. He considered totalitarianism an inevitable outcome of modern civilization; in other words, "the principle of totality is now required to restore order and unity" (Seo 1939a) because "capitalism is not just an economic institution, but it also determines political structures and cultural norms," "human relations are reified by the pursuit of profit," and "the contradiction between production and distribution is exacerbated" (Seo 1939b).

For Seo, however, totalitarianism (and the current understanding of it; predominantly, the German version) had significant problems: it "presumes inequality both within and between nations" and "prevents the accomplishment of a "cultural worldliness and universality" by not respecting the independence of either nations or individuals" (Poole 2014, 79). While criticizing the limitations of totalitarianism, Seo believed that regardless of its feasibility, the *kyōdōtai* could be an alternative system for overcoming both capitalism and socialism by promoting harmony and

cooperation among Asian peoples (T. Yi 2010, 100). As such, Seo projected his dialectical and utopian outlook, or what he called a "worldly world" (*segyeseong-ui segye*) onto the *kyōdōtai*, a future in which the particular embodies the universal and the universal is immanent to the particular. Consequently, the hierarchy between the *naichijin* and *gaichijin* would naturally disappear in this new world order.

Despite their differences in motive and theoretical ground, other *tenkōsha* like Bak Chiu (1909–1949), In Jeongsik (1907–?), and Kim Myeongsik (the one who opposed Nazism earlier in the mid-1930s) responded to imperial Japan's vision for East Asia. These former Korean socialists had not converted just because they feared state persecution. Instead, they reassessed the international trend as Japanese forces finally conquered most of Asia and the Soviet Union was losing its global influence (Hong 2011, 114). For the Korean *tenkōsha*, Nazism exposed its fragilities ostensibly because it stressed such essentialist ideas as bloodline, organism, and heroism. Bak viewed that the ideology of "blood" was the root of modern totalitarianism, which he referred to as "the mysterious thrill, the provocation of inspiration…[and] the myth that transcends science" (Bak [1941] 2010, 190–191). In his eyes, the Nazis relied on this notion to insist that the German *volk* indicates the "organic whole."

Meanwhile, the "Asian cooperative body" adopted the concept of the nation upheld by Miki—one constructs a nation historically and should prize cooperative values within the East Asian bloc (Fletcher 1979, 50–52). Impressed by such "rhetorical disavowal of the colonial relation," In and Kim had high expectations of "the wartime injunctions to "become Japanese" and to rethink Korea as a "region, and not a colony, of the imperial nation" (Poole 2014, 7). Kim Myeongsik especially advocated that Korea could restore its sovereign status by participating in the *kyōdōtai* (Son 2017, 21). He declared, "If Korea fulfills its mission as a mediator between Japan and China…[and] contributes to the construction of a new East Asia…our condition will surely improve" (M. Kim 1939, 50–51). Consequently, these Korean intellectuals—Yi, Seo, Bak, In, and Kim—interpreted fascism differently and presented disparate answers to the colonial reality; they diverged on key issues such as the universal-particular distinction, the extent

of individual liberty, and attitudes toward Nazism. Nonetheless, regardless of their political leanings, nationalist or socialist, they commonly wanted to redefine Korea's place within the empire and their relationship with the Japanese amidst the worsening worldwide conflict.

A complex phenomenon in colonial Korea, fascism was not reserved only for the elites; it even motivated ordinary Koreans to engage in political actions. The repercussions of fascism were truly unpredictable: neither the colonial authorities nor Korean leftists could foresee that fascism would influence anti-colonial struggles for Korea's political sovereignty. The so-called Evergreen Association (Sangnokhoe) incident is a noteworthy example. In March 1937, seniors from Chuncheon High School, including Namgung Tae and Mun Sehyeon, organized a secret society to recruit their fellow students and wage an insurrection against the colonial regime. They presided over underground meetings where they discussed current international affairs, their plans, and publications banned for inciting nationalist sentiments. Upon graduation from high school, several Sangnokhoe members continued their independence resistance in rural areas and even traveled to Manchuria to fight against the Kwantung Army (Gwangbokhoe gangwondo jibu 1991, 513–517). Many were arrested; according to colonial police records, some confessed that they had read books written by Hitler or other texts about his life and deeds, sympathizing with Hitler dedicating himself to his nation and getting it out of the predicament.

> Today I read Hitler's biography and thought I wanted to be like him. Although Hitler is from Austria, he applied to the German army. I want to become a volunteer soldier in China. If I can do so…I will be able to get [the Japanese] back someday. On my way home yesterday, I could not hold back my tears. From elite college students to lowly street beggars, they all speak Japanese…Some even use Japanese when training dogs. How pathetic is this?...[Hitler and I] have something in common and [similar goals]…The book has made me more desperate to go to China. Like Hitler, I will forget about myself and fight for a great cause…Hitler and I are the same in that we love our people. (NIKH [1938] 2004a)

This quote is from the diary of Jo Heunghwan (1916–?), one of the twelve students imprisoned in 1939 for taking part in the Sangnokhoe. It demonstrates how Jo viewed Japan and Hitler and how he envisioned seditiously subverting colonial rule. Perceiving imperial Japan as the archenemy he must fight, Jo was incensed that Koreans from all walks of life spoke Japanese. Identifying strongly with Hitler who joined the German army, despite his Austrian heritage, Jo wanted to become a volunteer in China where he would fight the Japanese. Jo believed colonial Korea had much in common with recent Germany: Korea chafed under colonial domination much like Germany had suffered from the debilitating terms of the Versailles Treaty; just as Hitler expelled the French and Belgian occupiers from the Rhineland, Jo dreamed of rousting the Japanese invaders from the peninsula; and like Hitler, he was committed to serving his people. If Hitler was an iconic figure of authority for Yi Gwangsu and other Korean elites who inspired Korea's assimilation into Japan's emperor-led fascist system, to Jo, he signified a revolutionary martyr who emboldened him to act upon his political beliefs.

For Jo's peers, Hitler could enlighten a weak and divided Korean populace, and Koreans must adopt his form of totalitarian control to reform their society regardless of the consequences. Fundamental to such an idea was a desire for power and dominance. Another Sangnokhoe member, Yong Hwangak (1917–1979), confessed during interrogation: "I was totally convinced that I would ascend to the pinnacle of a newly independent country and become its supreme ruler if I survived until Korea achieved liberation. I aspired to rebuild Korea into a strong, unified nation and to govern Koreans with an iron fist like Hitler did in Nazi Germany" (NIKH [1939] 2004b). Yong's remarks offer a glimpse into how fascism, specifically Hitler's authoritarian leadership, appealed to the anti-colonial Korean youth and could be harnessed to exert disciplinary power over the Korean body politic.

That Hitler inadvertently inspired some Korean nationalists to appropriate fascist ideas to further their anti-Japanese resistance posed a threat to the colonial administration, but that unexpected situation neither undermined the Germany-Japan alliance nor diminished Hitler's symbolic

significance within the public discourse of colonial Korea during this period. When Japan and Germany formed the Tripartite Pact with Italy in September 1940, the editorial pages of the *Maeil Sinbo* prominently featured Hitler and Mussolini. Yet not all was smooth sailing between Berlin and Tokyo. Even after signing the Tripartite Pact, "there was never total trust, cordiality, or friendship…[and] economic and technical assistance was minimal [between the two states]" (Nish 2020, 208). Moreover, Japan protested vehemently against Nazi Germany's violation of the Pact when it invaded the Soviet Union without prior consultation. Japanese bureaucrats and military officials also "sought to deny Germany a hegemonic position in Japan's backyard (Southeast Asia)" (Yellen 2019, 27). Nevertheless, praising Hitler as the incarnation of the German soul never abated. In April 1945, even after Hitler shot himself and Japan's alliance with the Nazis collapsed, merely invoking his memory provided powerful enough propaganda to help fuel Japan's demand for a final, desperate national mobilization. Below is a part of the eulogy published in the *Maeil Sinbo* two weeks after Hitler's suicide.

Germany, a country devasted by WWI,
when it was dancing to the devilish rhythm of Bolshevism,
Hitler, as the Commander in Chief, has come to the fore
to reconstruct his fatherland and save his corrupt and drunken people

57 was his age today,
without having a wife and a child
with all his heart in preparing for the war
devoting his whole life to his country . . .
he flew across Europe as if he were a tiger or a horse . . .

[Although] the Germans are committed
to dying honorably like shattered jewels,
suddenly
so suddenly
Alas! The everlasting hero Hitler has left

Germany, a nation that was reborn, was Hitler's Germany
It was a young 27-year-old nation
After Hitler's death, young Germany was defeated
But forever,
Hitler's soul will stay with us, and the German people will survive

Even if the name of the Nazis disappears,
their oath will never decay
we, the Japanese, believe in this. (*Maeil Sinbo* 1945)

Hitler's suicide and the defeat of the Third Reich alarmed the Japanese colonial authorities. In a vain attempt to forestall a similarly ignoble fate, they enhanced surveillance, censorship, and propaganda within the empire as it faced impending doom. Key to this tight social control was ideologically indoctrinating colonial subjects and fostering devotion to Japanese authority. This eulogy, penned by the military press and dedicated to Hitler, serves that goal and represents the culmination of the fascist aesthetics of Japanese imperialism. It "glorifies surrender, exalts mindlessness, and glamorizes death…[inducing] a complete submission either to absolute order or to a violent, undifferentiated, but liberating moment of violence" (Tansman 2009b, 4). By mythologizing Hitler not only as the eternal savior of the German people and nation but also as a superb model for colonial Koreans (and all imperial subjects) to follow, Japanese fascism wanted to provide the appropriate context for Japan's imperial "holy war" (*seisen*) and signal how its subjects should fulfill their patriotic duty. Under Hitler's dictatorship, the Japanese government valorized Nazi Germany as a harmonious and organic community that, in Harry D. Harootunian's words, had "overcome the division, disunity, and fragmentation that contemporary societies were experiencing" (Harootunian 2000, 30). Although Hitler had died, his spirit would live on forever for those Germans who swore to die as "shattered jewels" (*gyokusai*)—a Japanese euphemism for those who choose an honorable death against hopeless odds. This poetic invocation of martyrdom, which eerily evokes the crucifixion of Christ, was intended to inspire colonial subjects to naturalize their deaths as an embodiment of

loyalty to the emperor and confirm the quasi-religious practice of worshiping him. During the late colonial period, the all-embracing power of fascism sought to bind the individual, nation, and empire seamlessly into a coherent whole. As a result, the conflicting political desires—be they efforts by Korean right-wing elites to elevate their national status through assimilation, the struggle of Korean nationalists for independence, or the GGK's state-controlled mobilization—were met (or not met) solely within the parameters shaped by the *sacrosanct* nation and empire in which the individual was merely a tiny part.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the shifting perceptions of Hitler and the politics of fascism in the public discourse of colonial Korea. The fluid view of Hitler and lived experience of fascism cannot be separated from the changing place of Korea in the empire as it engaged with broader structural contexts, including the Great Depression, Japan's international coalitions, and total war. During that precarious time, the increasing attention on the Nazis and the deepening emotional affinity that Koreans felt toward Hitler coincided with colonial Korea's participation in the globally expanding fascist movement, which, in turn, prompted Koreans to rethink their position within the colonial setting. As fascism instituted itself into their daily lives, the GGK could not fully control the outcome of fascist politics. Some pro-Japanese elites assumed that championing fascist ideals would elevate their status within the colonial hierarchy. At the same time, young student activists committed to restoring Korean sovereignty internalized the logic of power embedded in fascism in an effort to overthrow the colonial system. Scrutinizing the complications of life under fascism, particularly within colonial Korea, helps us understand why this violent ideology and practice could appeal to people far removed, culturally and geographically, from Nazi Germany and how the allure of its authoritarian power, its ethnic hatred, and its scapegoating of the Other, tragically continues to find adherents in the present.

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