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# August 15 in Tokyo and Seoul: Tragedy and Celebration

**Mark Caprio**

***Abstract:*** *August 15 remains an important day in Korean and Japanese cultures for the two peoples, the former commemorating their liberation from colonial rule and the latter lamenting the end of the tragedy that had befallen their nation. On this day in 1945, the emperor declared his country's intention to accept the Allied forces' surrender terms. This date, however, is a myth of sorts as the Koreans were soon after forced into division and further subjugation at the hands of the United States and the Soviet Union, who divided postwar occupation responsibilities. For the Japanese, the emperor's unprecedented broadcast may have ended the bombing of Japanese cities, but it did not bring about a general return of Japanese soldiers from Pacific War battlefields. These days, however, the day is marked for concluding two tragic periods of their histories, but with very different sentiments. In this article the author traces his observations on how the Japanese and Koreans observe August 15 in contemporary times.*

***Keywords****: August 15, Pacific War, Koreans, Japanese, Celebration, Lamentation*

## Introduction

Each year, August 15 is commemorated in three states across Northeast Asia: the two Koreas—the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea)—and Japan, but with totally different sentiments.[1] For the Koreas, the day carries the dual significance of liberation from colonial Japan, but also the beginning of their divided history. In the ROK this day is known as *Kwangbokchŭl*, or the "day that the light returned." They also remember their state's founding day in 1948. The DPRK, which was officially inaugurated the following month on September 9, observes the day as *Chogukhaebangŭl*, or the day of the colonial "liberation of the Fatherland." In Japan, on the other hand, August 15 commemorates the end of the Pacific War (*Shūsen kinenbi*), the day that the emperor delivered his "Jewel Voice broadcast" (*Gyokuon hōsō*) throughout the nation and the empire to end the war. Here he announced that Japan was prepared to accept the Allied forces' terms of surrender as stated in the Potsdam Declaration, which was issued on July 26, 1945.

Both the Koreans and the Japanese misrepresent the significance of this day. While the Koreans technically were liberated from colonial occupation by Japan's decision to end the war, their subjugator's influence continued in southern Korea up to the United States' arrival in Korea in September 1945, and beyond.[2] For the Japanese, even though the emperor announced his decision to end the war (*sensō wo owaraseru*), his broadcast did not completely end the fighting as battles continued to rage afterwards. The solemn day bookmarks a series of Pacific War commemorative ceremonies that lead up to the day, starting in Okinawa on June 23, the day the battles

1 Taiwan apparently remembers the day, but does little to commemorate it. Mainland China has held commemorative events on this day, but not consistently. See Chŏng Kŭnsik and Shin Chupaek (2009). Additionally, India also commemorates August 15 as the day it gained independence from Great Britain in 1947.

2 The United States occupation team arrived at In'chŏn on September 8 but was delayed from advancing to Seoul by a typhoon until the following day. The U.S. not reaching the southern-most island of Korea, Cheju-do, until 40 days after August 15 suggests that the Japanse were able to extend their colonial administration there, as well as in other places within the U.S. occupation zone (Heo 2021, 49). U.S. and UN forces were dependent on the knowledge that the Japanese had gathered of Korea during the years of colonial rule throughout the three-year occupation period and again with the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950.



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there finally ended, and continue into early August in Hiroshima (August 6) and Nagasaki (August 9) to remember the days that atomic bombs were dropped on those cities. It also did not bring all overseas Japanese home. Many of the overseas Japanese subjects joined armies across the region which experienced fighting for years after.[3] Also, the Soviet Union continued to battle Japanese troops beyond this date. They also transported an estimated 550,000 to 750,000 Japanese men as prisoners to labor camps in Siberia, tens of thousands of whom died in captivity. The remains of as many as 30,000 Japanese who died while trying to repatriate remain entombed in scattered graves throughout the DPRK.[4] One soldier, Onoda Hirō, remained active in the jungles of the Philippine Islands until 1974 when he was finally convinced to surrender.

For the Allied forces, August 15 is remembered as VJ Day, but the war would not officially end until September 2, when the Japanese formally signed surrender papers aboard the *USS Missouri* in Tokyo Bay. Similar surrender ceremonies continued in China into October with one taking place on October 10 in Beijing's Forbidden City. Today there is no official national day of remembrance in the United States to commemorate the end of the bloody years that sent Americans to fight on European and Asian war fronts.

Two sabbatical years, and close residential proximity, situated me within an hour's journey of the two capitals on separate occasions to observe how the Korean and Japanese peoples observe this day. Assuming that the more interesting events would take place in their respective capitals, Seoul and Tokyo, I limited my travels to these two cities; I did not go elsewhere. Here I found the two peoples observing this day to commemorate a single event, but in very different ways, and for very different reasons.

## Preserving (and Destroying) Historic Memory

Nations go to great lengths to preserve their histories by designating important sites, buildings, and dates to remind the living of the significance. Guy Podoler explains that nations consume "commemorative landscapes …as historical texts [with] the understanding of which sheds light on the way nations perceive, establish, and convey their identity."[5] The keyword here is "identity," a concept necessary to preserve and disseminate a united national narrative among the nation's constituents. Doing so restricts competing narratives which are given a limited space (if any), lest they interfere with the hegemonic story that the nation wishes its people to accept as its one "true" history. This involves the nation assigning importance to specific events to its national narratives. It allows the state to draw differences from other states that share the same date for similar events, such as August 15 does for the Japanese and Koreans. Often the state finds it necessary to silence or engage the people in forgetting certain aspects that conflict with this story, even going so far as to destroy historical sites for this purpose.

While elements of the narrative become more permanently engraved in this national narrative (through, for example, school textbooks and museums), other occasions engrave the dates and stories of the events on calendars and monuments to remind the nation of their importance, as well as the reasons why they are deemed important. These dates, depending on the degree of importance that the state affords them, become national holidays or simply special days set aside to commemorate the particular event. The United States, for example, commemorates November 11 as a special holiday (Veterans Day) that was originally formed to remember the date when the belligerent participants laid down their arms to return the world from the horrors of the First World War (it has since been expanded to include people who participated in all wars). However, as mentioned above, no similar official holiday has been proclaimed to remember when the Second World War ended. The days, however, are given im-

3 A general history of this is detailed in Spector (2007). See also Caprio (2021) for the situation in Korea.

4 See Mizuno Naoki (2014).

5 Guy Podoler (2011, 11).



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portance to different degrees in the collective memories of other nations for different reasons.

Both Japan and the Koreas include a number of sites that are designed to preserve their respective national narrative which, like many other countries, is heavily formed around war. Japan maintains various museums across the archipelago that are dedicated to tell the story of its war history, particularly the Asia Pacific wars (1931–1945) and their aftermaths. These range from the Yūshūkan (which explains why Japan had to go to war), to the Shōwa-kan (which details how the Japanese survived the war and managed to rebound into an economic powerhouse), to the Chiran Peace Museum in Kyushu (which honors the memory of the suicidal *Shinpū Tokubetsu Kōgekitai* [Kamikaze] pilots).

These narratives are reinforced in school textbooks, comic books, films, and the like. Around Japan's capital city of Tokyo, there are markers situated to designate other events, many from previous wars, to inform people of their significance. For example, three temples in Tokyo house gates with bullet and cannon holes that were penetrated by Meiji forces in 1868 to enter Kan'ei temple complex (presently Ueno Park) to flush out Tokugawa loyalists who had assembled there. Signs inform viewers of the gates' significance.[6] Destruction caused by the aerial bombings that the United States inflicted upon the Japanese capital in the last year of the Pacific War is limited mainly in the form of signs telling how a certain temple or gate was destroyed by the attacks before being rebuilt over the postwar years.[7]

Such Korean remnants in Seoul are few and primarily limited to the Korean War due to the war's destruction and to more recent urban development. There are a number of colonial-era buildings that remain.[8] Most signs can be found in or around museums. They include exhibits from primarily the Korean War, and to a lesser extent the Imjin wars of the sixteenth century, when Hideyoshi Toyotomi tried to subdue Korea before his planned attack on China. The War Memorial of Korea (Chŏnjaeng Kinyŏmgwan) located in the Yongsam area, for example, greets visitors with the "Clock Tower of Peace," a bronze statue made up of female figures holding two clocks over a pile of rubble: one with the present time; another frozen at June 25, 4:00 a.m. to remind visitors of the exact time when the ROK remembers being invaded by DPRK armies from the north to initiate the Korean War. Space for a third clock, designed to include a yet another clock that will be situated to indicate the time when the north and south are reunified, is set aside for this purpose. In P'yŏngyang in the DPRK there is a war museum, the Fatherland Liberation War Victory Memorial Hall (Choguk Haebang Chŏnchaeng Sŭnri Kinyŏmgwan) that displays U.S. weapons captured in battles during the Korean War.

These places serve to add to the national narrative by reminding the nation of the more trying times that they faced in previous years and the sacrifices that its people made to ensure the state's continuity.

## August 15, 1945

August 15 is special for both Japan and the Koreas, but for very different reasons. Uniting them is the Japanese emperor's August 15, 1945 announcement to Japan, its empire, and to the world, that his country was prepared to accept the demands of the Allied forces. Prior to this speech, people throughout the empire were informed that his majesty would broadcast an important message to his subjects at noon on that day. People were to gather around radios at this time, which many did. The emperor's words were stilted, projected in a form of the Japanese language with which many were not familiar. That unusually formal Japanese oratory style and the poor radio re-

6 Though the battles took place over 150 years ago, there are more remnants of this one-day battle than of these U.S. fire bombings of Tokyo during the Pacific War just under 80 years ago.

7 Some remnants can be found at Azabu Zenpukuji, ironically the home of the first American Embassy in Tokyo. Here one can see charred roots of a 750-year old ginkgo tree reportedly caused by U.S. air raids during the final year of the Pacific War. Also, bullet holes remain on the Kamakura Bridge in central Tokyo.

8 One exception is in the southernmost island of Cheju-do where the remains of tunnels dug by the Japanese in anticipation of an Allied invasion still exist and now are used as tourist sites.



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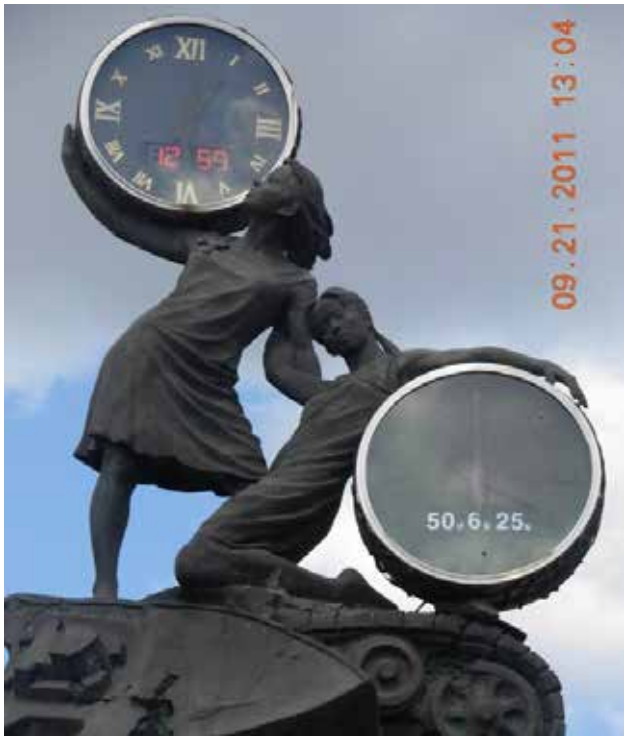


*Top. The two clocks that make up the Clock Tower of Peace.*
*Bottom. Items captured by the DPRK armies that are on display at the country's war museum in P'yŏng-yang.*

ception further complicated the nation's understanding of the emperor's unprecedented broadcast—most Japanese had never heard his voice before that day.[9]

It was followed by a short summary offered by an NHK announcer that provided people with the gist of the emperor's message: the war was over; Japan had agreed to surrender to the Allied forces. Pictures from this time show a large number of Japanese who had gathered outside the palace walls bowing in the emperor's direction, many to reportedly offer their apologies for their wartime efforts being insufficient to deliver victory to Japan. Others, unable to bear the shame of defeat, chose to commit suicide. Still others recall acknowledging a feeling of relief that fifteen years of continuous warfare and sacrifice were finally behind them.[10]

In contrast, Koreans in Japan and around the empire took to the streets in celebration as they translated Japan's defeat into their country's liberation from colonial rule. The Shinto shrines were the first to go as Korean people burned many of the shrines that the Japanese had erected across the Peninsula. The sight of Koreans marching in celebration frightened some Japanese, who in most cases were outnumbered. Smoke filled the skies as the colonizers took to burning important and potentially incriminating documents.[11] At this point, perhaps, few Koreans (particularly those residing in Korea) would know that their country's liberation would be followed by an undetermined period of Allied occupation, or that the Japanese would be instructed to remain in power in southern Korea until the U.S. arrived to formally accept their surrender, at least until the U.S. agreed to drop fliers informing the Koreans of this decision.[12]

9 For an account of the broadcast and different people's reaction to it, see Samuel Hideo Yamashita (2015, 173–89). Days after his broadcast, the emperor felt compelled to dispatch members of the royal family to the war fronts with a personal message, the Daitōa sensō shūsen ni saishite rikukaigunjin ni tamawaritaru chokugo" [Receipt Addressed to our Soldiers and Sailors Concerning Surrender] to inform soldiers that the broadcast reflected his true intentions. Interestingly, though the August 15 broadcast emphasized the atomic bombing as the reason for his decision, his second message informed that the Soviet army attacks on Japanese forces from Northeast China (Manchuria) caused him to make the decision to surrender. The atomic bombings do not appear in the text of this message. See Barshay (2013, 9) for a description of this second message.

10 Yamashita (2015, 173–89).

11 At least these were some of the reactions as remembered by observers in Ōminato at the northern tip of Japan's main island of Honshu. Thousands of workers, mostly Koreans, were brought here and had labored to protect the naval base located here by building an airfield in its vicinity. See Caprio (2019).

12 From around September 1, 1945, the Japanese in Seoul and the eventual occupiers of southern Korea, the XXIV Corps in Okinawa led by Lieutenant General John R. Hodge, began exchanging radiograms with his Japanese counterpart in Korea, Lieutenant General Kozuki Yoshio, where the U.S. general instructed the Japanese on surrender procedures. Kozuki warned Hodge



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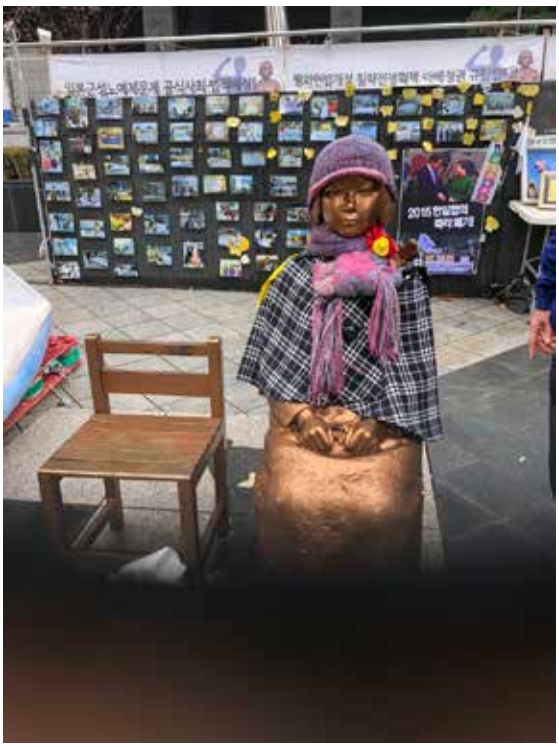

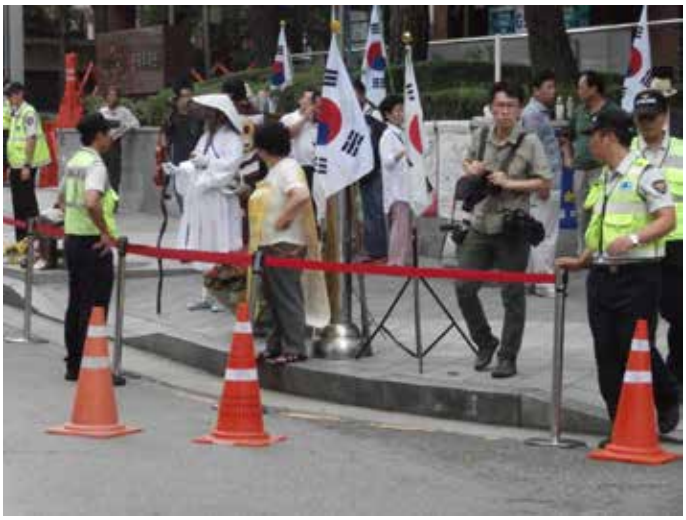

*Top. The Statue of Peace on a cold December morning, thus dressed to keep warm.*
*Bottom. A Korean in traditional costume lecturing the Japanese from across the street of the Japanese embassy in Seoul on August 15, 2013.*

Various State Department postwar plans for Korea (and Japan) had the U.S. forming a four-state coalition to include China, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union to occupy these territories.[13] For the Korean peninsula to be divided at the 38th parallel, however, was a plan proposed by the U.S. only after the Soviet armies had entered the war against Japan and had commenced their invasion of Manchuria and northern Korea, and after the Japanese had signaled their willingness to end the war around August 11. The Soviet Union accepted the U.S. proposal within days and, to the surprise of many U.S. officials, honored their commitment even though their armies could easily have occupied the entire peninsula. Indeed, for the first week following the emperor's broadcast, the Japanese administration in Seoul had prepared to surrender to the Soviets. After learning that they would surrender to the U.S., they reported to U.S. military officials, still in Okinawa, of their recent encounters with Soviet military personnel below the line of division.[14] Thus, while the Korean people continue to commemorate the significance of the events of August 15, 1945, the day would be followed by continued Japanese influence over their affairs, a post-liberation divided occupation by the United States and the Soviet Union, a brutal three-year war, decades of dictatorial administrations, and continued division of the peninsula.

### *Seoul 2013*

Two sabbatical years put me in Seoul on August 15 in 2013 and 2020. In 2013, I, along with a few students, travelled throughout the city to discover what events attracted South Korean attention on this day. Various television shows the previous night set the

that communists and independence seekers were causing trouble in Korea, which prompted the U.S. general to instruct them to maintain control until he and his men arrived. Hodge also promised to drop leaflets over southern Korea to inform the Korean people of this. See U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, RG 554, Box 33, Folder: Repatriation and Transfer of Control to U.S.. Bruce Cumings (1981, 126–27) also addresses this communication in the first volume of his study on the origins of the Korean War.

13 For various postwar plans see Iokibe (1987).

14 The Japanese government general in Seoul had gone as far as to request Koreans to form a provisional government. A moderate leftist with Soviet ties, Yŏ Un-hyŏng, finally accepted the job on August 15 on the condition that the Japanese agree to a series of conditions: that they release political and economic prisoners, they guarantee food provisions, and they refrain from interfering in his new administration's operations. After the Japanese learned of the U.S. plan to divide the Peninsula and that the government general would most likely surrender to the U.S. army, they withdrew their support for Yŏ. In response to their informing the U.S. that "communists and independence seekers" were overrunning the Peninsula, the U.S. told them to keep the peace until the occupation forces arrived. These agitators were most likely members of the People's Committees (*Inmin wiwŏnhoe*), that Yŏ had helped establish to govern locally.



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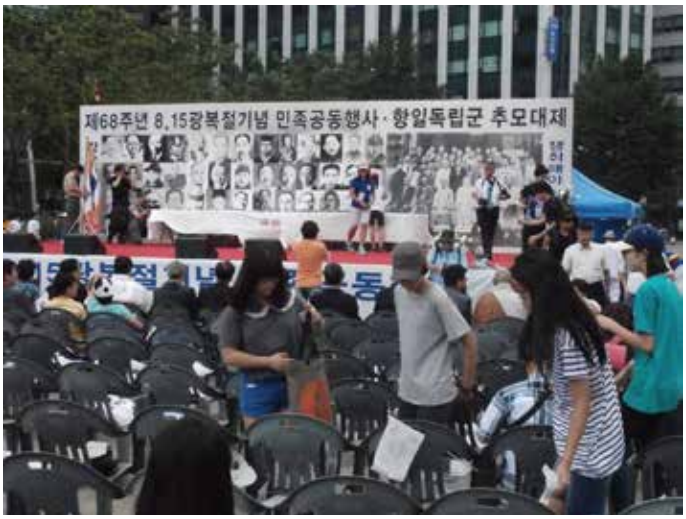
tone of the day by carrying documentaries related to Korea's colonial history. One television program, carried on the evening of August 14, argued that the bombing of Hiroshima could have been avoided if Japan had surrendered earlier, thus liberating Korea a week earlier, preventing the Soviets from entering the war, and keeping Korea united. Thus, our first inclination was to visit the spots where anti-Japanese activity might occur. Also, a prerecorded interview I conducted with the Arirang television station that was scheduled to air this day was suddenly cancelled and replaced due to a comment I made which the station interpreted to be overly sympathetic to the Japanese.

This was not to be the case. The first indication was that it was access to the United States embassy, rather than the Japanese embassy, that the police had blocked off. In contrast to this, there was nothing to obstruct us from making our way to the Japanese embassy. A space across the street from the Japanese embassy has traditionally been the site that Koreans have used to deliver anti-Japanese messages. Since January 1992, weekly Wednesday-demonstrations organized by The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery (*Hanguk chŏngsin taemunje taech'aek hyŏqŭihoi*) had gathered to show their support for the country's unresolved military "comfort women" grievances. In 2001, the Statue of Peace (*Pyŏnghwa ŭi sonŏsang*), depicting a young girl sitting on a bench that symbolically represents a woman that the Japanese abused during the wartime period in the form of "sexual slavery," was created. The elimination of this statue, which stares up at the Japanese embassy across the street, had been at the center of talks between Korean and Japanese leaders who have met in an effort to resolve lingering colonial-era issues.[15]

On this particular day, however, save for a single man dressed in traditional Korean costume yelling anti-Japanese messages in the direction of the embassy, accompanied by a few curious bystanders, there was little action. The other colonial era-related ceremony that I witnessed on that day took place in Seoul City Hall Plaza, a grassy space in front of the city hall building often used for public gatherings. (When Japan played the ROK in the World Baseball Classic in 2009, for example, South Koreans gathered here to support the home team. Video screens were set up and t-shirts were being sold). On this day an event was being staged to honor Korean heroes in the anti-Japanese liberation movement. Here, too, a sparse crowd was in attendance, with many of the chairs that had been prepared to accommodate a larger crowd remaining unoccupied.




*Ceremony at Seoul City Hall Plaza to honor anti-Japanese patriots who fought for their country's liberation.*

The scene in front of Seoul Station contrasted with these sparsely attended sites quite dramatically. Here a large number of people had gathered for a reason at best indirectly related to Japan's colonial history, but closely related to its aftermath, as the date also signifies the start of the Peninsula's divided history. It was the United States that first proposed division at the 38th parallel to demarcate the Soviet (north) and U.S. (south) zones of occupation in the late hours of August 10–11, 1945; Soviet acceptance of

15 The most recent example was at the meeting of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and ROK President Pak Kŭn-hye in 2015. A deal reached by the two sides broke down partially over Pak's inability to follow through on her alleged promise to have the statue removed. The request, if it indeed was accepted by Pak, would have been hard for the generally unpopular president to honor as, according to a ROK newspaper, its presence was supported by over 75 percent, and its relocation approved by only ten percent, of the South Korean public who were polled (Kang Seung-woo September 8, 2016).



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*L. Demonstrators for peaceful unification gathering in front of Seoul Station.*
*R. Korean police near the site of one gathering.*

this proposal, and both sides failing to work toward erasing this dividing line, ushered in the long period of division. Some Koreans contest that it is the superpower that remains a critical obstacle to the two Koreas advancing toward more congenial ties.[16] People gathered here to demand a peaceful end to this history of Korean division. Signs calling for "unification" (*t'ongil ŭl!*) and for "peace" (*p'yŏng-hwa rŭl*) signified demands of future aspirations rather than retribution of past colonial grievances. Blue Korean Peninsula maps, minus the DMZ line, graced many of the large posters that decorated the main stage. This particular rally was by far the best attended event that I saw in the city, both in terms of participants and the police force. The events of this day, however, were peaceful, thus rendering the strong show of authority as perhaps needless.[17]

### *Seoul 2020*

Compared to 2013, in 2020 the magnitude of those in attendance at the events on this day had dropped dramatically, partially due to the Covid-19 virus and the inclement weather. The circumstances of the time had also changed from seven years previous, perhaps due to the inability of the Moon Jae-in (Mun Chae-in) administration to realize success with his controversial north-friendly efforts and his shaky economic policies. The Seoul Station area was nearly empty. Instead, many people had gathered along the streets and sidewalks in Seoul's downtown area, between the City Hall and the Kwanghwamun Palace squares. Those who braved the at times heavy rainfall, as well as the threat of virus infection, appeared to be drawn together in opposition to, rather than in support of, unification, at least as Moon saw it unfolding.

A recent trend in ROK politics is that comparatively DPRK-friendly administrations tend to get voted out of office when their north-friendly efforts fail to produce concrete results, only to be voted back into office when conservative get-tough-policies with DPRK administrations threaten peninsula security. Neither party seems to have come up with the formula needed to improve these relations, due in no small part to the fact that the United States insists that the southern triangle (U.S. Japan, and the ROK) be on the same page when they try to deal with the DPRK. That the U.S. conditions advancement on the DPRK fulfilling overly stringent prerequisites, such as a sincere movement toward total denuclearization and its verification on having done so, inhibits any progress toward peaceful resolution of these issues, particularly when the DPRK insists on negotiations progressing in a reciprocal tit-for-tat way.[18] The

16 One example was seen in earlier attempts to connect a railroad across the DMZ. See Lee Je-hun (2022).

17 It was explained to me that the reason for the large number of policemen around the Seoul downtown area on this particular day was that it presented an opportunity to put to use the young Korean men then fulfilling their required military service duties.

18 Siegfried S. Heckler (2023) identifies a number of "hinge points"



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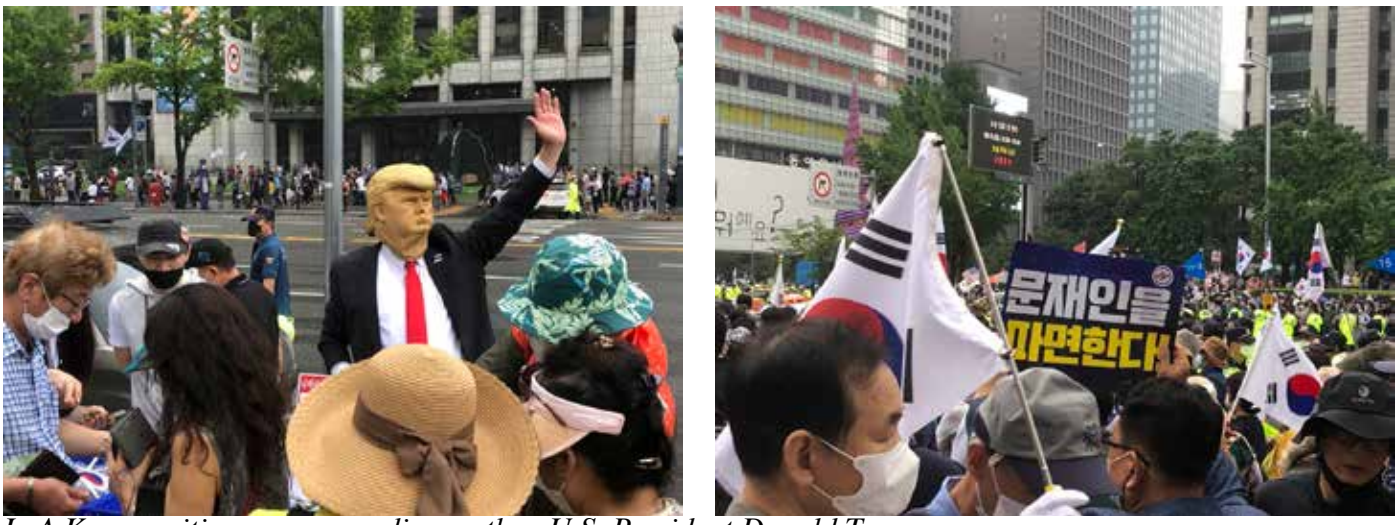


*L. A Korean citizen masquerading as then U.S. President Donald Trump. R. Signs calling for President Moon's dismissal.*

DPRK's missile and nuclear tests play a major role in orchestrating these shifts in ROK politics.

The majority of the crowd gathered on this occasion appeared to be in opposition to the current administration, particularly its economic policies and its positive, but unsuccessful, overtures to the DPRK which included Moon's meeting with DPRK leader Kim Jong-un (Kim Chŏng-un) on at least three occasions. Signs sprinkled throughout the crowd called for his dismissal (*Mun Che-in ŭl p'amyŏn handae*). One other sign, written in English, declared the recent April 15, 2019 midterm elections, which strengthened Moon Jae-in's party majority, an "illegal fraud." The only hints of success of his efforts to come to terms with Kim Jong-un had been in Moon's convincing U.S. President Donald Trump to meet with the DPRK leader. Unfortunately, their three meetings—in Singapore (2018), at the DMZ (2019), and in Hanoi (2019)—had ended in failure. Some in the crowd demanded the release of Moon's impeached and imprisoned predecessor, Pak Kŭn-hye. The crowd, which did not directly voice a stance on unification, was clearly rallying for stronger ROK-United States ties, a sign of their support for a tougher stance toward the DPRK. One person donned a Donald Trump mask to express his apparently pro-U.S. sentiment, a curious choice considering the amicable relations that Trump reported to have developed with the DPRK leader. The *Korea Times* reported the following day that among the estimated 10,000 demonstrators, thirty had been arrested for assaulting police and ignoring Covid-19 virus protocol as directed by the government.[19]

Thus, we see here a conflict of historical memory, and an attempt by the opposition to return ROK policy away from "carrot" policies to engage the communist state into developing a working relationship. What policy the opposition advocated for is further from a state of peaceful unification as was popular in 2013, and instead closer to the hardline policies that united the ROK and U.S. forces against the DPRK (as well as China and Russia), in many ways resembling the divisions that existed during the Cold War.

### *Tokyo 2014*

On the other side of the seas that separate Japan from Korea (K. East Sea; J. Sea of Japan), August 15, with important exceptions, is observed as a reflection of the past, the country's "dishonorable" surrender in 1945, and calls for a revival of the

where he feels the United States backed off chances for resolving its issues with the DPRK's nuclear weapons, only to see the communist state advance its nuclear program further.

19 Kim Se-jong notes that the police searched members of the Sarang Jeil Church that had among its flock a high number of people infected by the virus. In the days that followed warnings were issued for people who attended the rally to get tested. See *Korea Times* (August 16, 2020). I was made to get tested by staff members at the institute with which I was affiliated at the time.



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prewar Japanese military, the latter sentiment driven by administrations favoring constitutional change and the restructure of Japan as a "normal country" (*futsū no kuni*).[20] A minority of voices called for the need to preserve the "peace" constitution and work toward global peace. Other gatherings, perhaps in churches, may echo this sentiment. August tends to be a time when war-related articles grace the pages of Japanese newspapers in greater frequency. However, the most popular activities in Tokyo are held in and around the war-centered Shinto shrine, Yasukuni Jinja, located in the heart of the city.[21]

Yasukuni Jinja was founded in 1869 to honor members of the imperial forces that offered their lives during the Meiji Restoration battles. The Boshin War (1868–1869) was fought between Tokugawa and Meiji forces in various parts of the archipelago (including the aforementioned Battle of Ueno) between the loyalist (Tokugawa) forces and the imperial (Meiji) upstarts. These battles helped to strengthen the new Meiji government's rise to power in 1868. The shrine continued to honor the spirits of the dead in the wars that followed, such as those against China (1894–95) and Russia (1904–1905). Those who fought in the Asia Pacific wars (1931–45) gained a simplified peace of mind in believing that should they experience an "honorable" death on the battlefield their spirits would gain immortality after they had been admitted into Yasukuni, where they would reunite with their war comrades. Sentiment toward the shrine turned controversial in 1978 when it admitted for enshrinement the spirits of fourteen Japanese convicted of Class A war criminals in the aftermath of the Asia Pacific wars. Since this time, protests have been voiced whenever sitting prime ministers and members of their cabinets made official visits to the shrine to pay their respects to soldiers who gave their lives primarily during the Pacific War. Moreover, Koreans, Chinese, and Taiwanese have also voiced objections over their fellow countrymen's spirits being automatically entered into the shrine after they had died fighting for Japan during the Pacific War. It should be noted that there are no graves in Yasukuni shrine; the shrine exists to honor the spirits of the dead warriors rather than their physical remains.

Though on an average day a popular destination for visitors—from tourists to bereaved family members—on August 15 Yasukuni Jinja explodes into a Mecca for Japanese who appear in droves to express their condolences, either as private citizens who had lost a relative or friend in the war, or as a conservative ultra-right element who believe it to be their national obligation to show their respects. Many also use the occasion to lobby for patriotic caused, such as for a "correct" interpretation of Japan's colonial and wartime history, particularly as it has been presented in history textbook revisions. Other places across the city attract activity on this day, but to a lesser extent than at Yasukuni Jinja.

Though their numbers have decreased recently, on any given day black and white vans decorated with various military flags can be seen roaming the streets of Japanese cities, often loudly blaring nationalistic music to attract attention. These vehicles occasionally park in strategic places to make nationalist, as well as anti-Korea or anti-Chinese, speeches. Their numbers increase dramatically on August 15, often occupying space in front of busy train stations or government buildings to spew their messages. On this particular day one caravan chose space on the east side of the entrance of the world's third busiest train station, after Shinjuku and Shibuya (also in Tokyo), Ikebukuro Station, for this purpose. Here conservative elements climbed onto the vans' roofs that were fitted with make-do stages to accommodate them; on this particular day the topic was the Chinese threat. The banners that decorated the vans called for a variety of other topics: demands that the Japanese prime minister make official visits to pray at Yasukuni Jinja (*Shūsō ha Yasukuni Jinja ni seishiki sanpai seyo!*), that Japan revive its imperial forces (*Kōgun fukkatsu*), and that Japan establish a "Greater

20 According to Seoul National University scholar Nam Ki-chŏng (2016, Chapter 8), who followed opinion polls taken during the Korean War by Japanese newspapers, these issues were debated from the early 1950s, during the Korean War.

21 John Breen (2008) traces the history of Yasukuni Jinja. See also Li Ying's documentary "Yasukuni."



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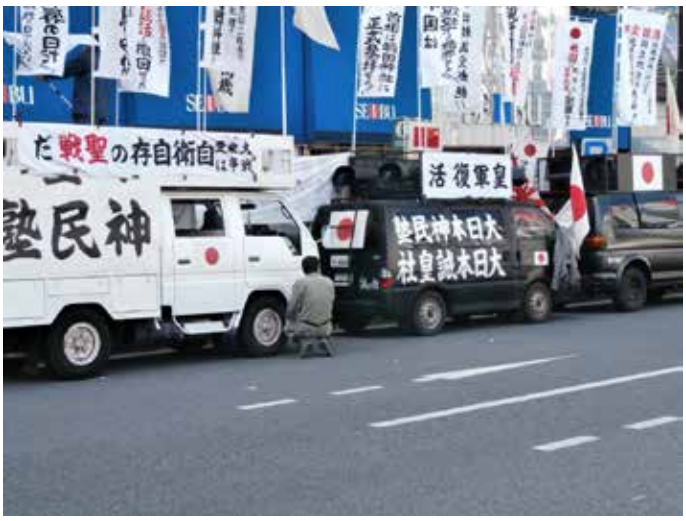
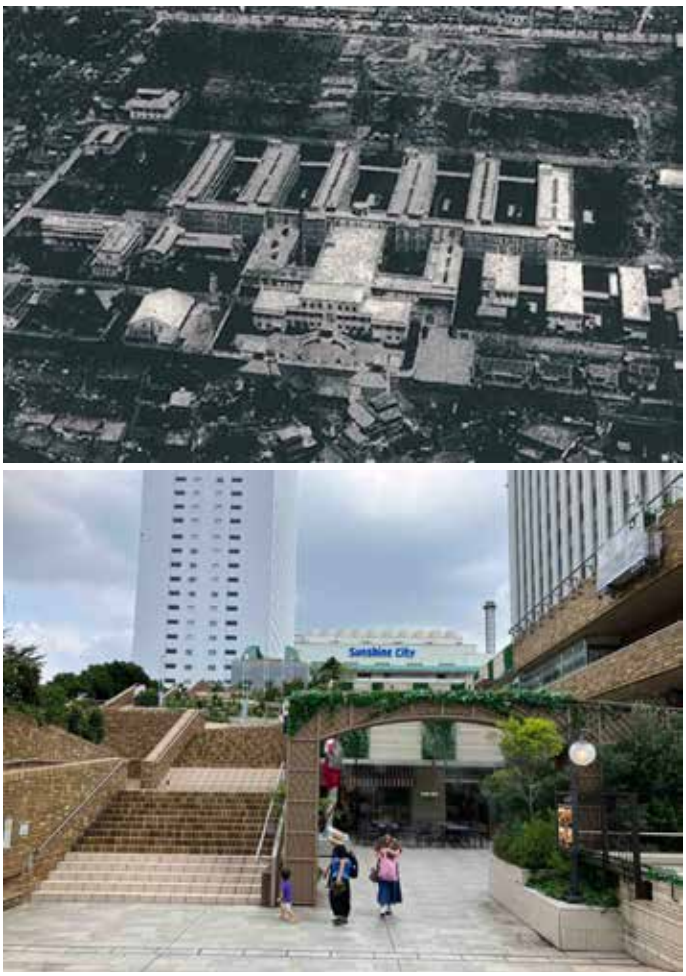



*Vans parked in front of Ikebukuro Station advancing a number of nationalist issues.*

Japan sacred national's school" (*Dai Nippon shinmin juku*), among other demands.

Close to Ikebukuro Station is another site of interest—Sugamo Prison— where Allied prisoners and Japanese found guilty of war crimes were interned. Many tried in the Tokyo War Tribunal served time here before their execution in 1948. In contrast to the Korean prison, Sŏdaemun, which is maintained as a museum, in 1962 the Japanese prison was closed and a decade later finally dismantled. It was replaced by a facility that houses a collection of high-end restaurants and shops, as well as a hotel and an aquarium: Sunshine City.

On the premises there does remain a small commemorative boulder to inform people of what had stood here decades previous. The boulder is hidden by trees and shrubs in a corner of a small park adjacent to the complex, and protected by the Sunshine City police box (*kōban*). Engraved on the front of the stone is a short statement that encourages visitors to "Hope for Eternal Peace" (*Eien heiwa wo negatte*); the less visible back side, however, offers a much longer explanation of the site's significance. (On another occasion the boulder was decorated with pictures of nine executed Japanese found guilty of Class A war crimes during the Asia Pacific wars against China and the U.S.) The Sunshine City




*Top: Sugamo prison 1895–1962*
*Bottom: Sunshine City shopping center 1978–present*

complex is generally quiet save for reports of ghosts who haunt the high-end Prince Hotel and shopping facilities that replaced the prison.[22] This particular day saw a rather young Japanese male—a descendent of the deceased?—who fought off a mild but steady wind in an attempt to light incense sticks that he planned to leave at the memorial site.[23]

22 General Tōjō Hideki, one of the Class A prisoners of war executed after the war who has a tomb stone in Tokyo's vast Zoshigaya cemetery situated close to Sunshine City, is rumored to frequent the top floor of the Prince Hotel located in the complex.

23 The prison, built in 1895, was used by the Japanese government until 1945 when it was handed over to the U.S. occupation forces for their use. The World War II spy, Richard Sorge, was in residence here until his execution in 1944.



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*L. The memorial boulder at Sunshine City bearing a message for people to "hope for eternal peace." R. Pictures of nine Class A war criminals executed after the war who were incarcerated at the prison by the American occupation forces.*

Sunshine City represents an attempt by Japan to hide or even destroy controversial history in its decision to raze the former prison and build a shopping center over it. Yet, the memorial boulder hidden in a corner of the complex ensures that this history will forever be preserved, and that memory of the Japanese figures who died for their country's cause as well will remain to the few people who know of its existence. It will also continue to enjoy the protection of the local *kōban* which exists in its shadow, that is, as long as the boulder remains in its place. For as seen in the United States south, historical markers can be replaced or eliminated as has been the fate of many of Confederate-era statues in the region.

Yasukuni Jinja, however, is Japan's busiest site on this day, a place where the majority of people gather to commemorate the day for a number of reasons. The surrounding area, has a number of interesting sites. Within the shrine confines is the Yūshūkan war museum. Located just across the street from Yasukuni is one of the old gates leading to the Imperial Palace, with the Showa-kan museum, the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery, and the Budōkan[24] within easy walking distance of this area.[25] On this particular day in Yasukuni Jinja, three long and distinct lines formed that led to the shrine's main altar: On the far left were the "tourists" (like myself), many wielding cameras, to observe and record the events of the day. Forming a middle line were casually dressed people (both male and female) apparently there to pray for a personal relative or friend who had died in the war (as was the case of the one person who, out of apparent curiosity, approached me to ask why I was here on this particular day). To the far right queued a different group, primarily men, who battled the hot mid-summer day in black funeral attire or heavy camouflage garb who appeared to be in attendance for a third more general reason: rather than for a deceased relative, had they come to observe the day's general significance—war defeat, to commemorate the war dead as a collective entity, or both. Banner-wielding people mingled among the visitors with signs calling for the emperor's longevity, for August 15 to be renamed as the "spirits of the war dead memorial day" (*Eirei tsitō no hi*), and to denounce so-called Japanese war atrocities (such as the Nanking massacre and the "military comfort women issue") as "fabrication." The day also

24 The Budōkan was built for the 1964 summer Olympics, and remodeled in preparation for the 2000 summer Olympics, both held in Tokyo, to hold the martial arts events. It is perhaps more popular for music concerts—the Beatles played here in 1966. Every August 15 a ceremony is held here attended by the emperor and empress who offer prayers to the war dead before a large sea of yellow chrysanthemums.

25 The Showa-kan museum contains two floors that tell the wartime and immediate postwar lifestyle of the average Japanese citizen during the time during and after the Pacific War. It also has floors with a library of print and audio materials from this period. The Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery remembers Japanese who did not return from the war.



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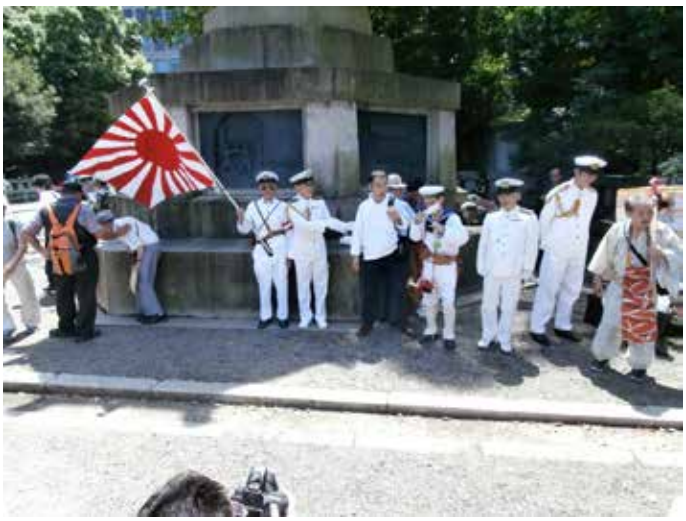
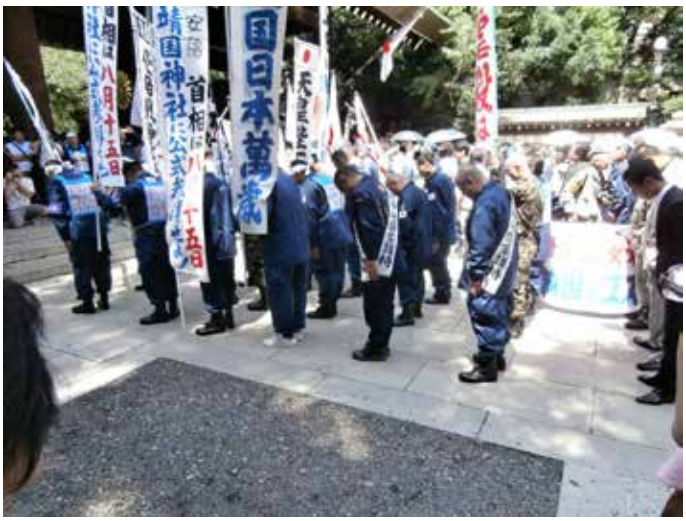
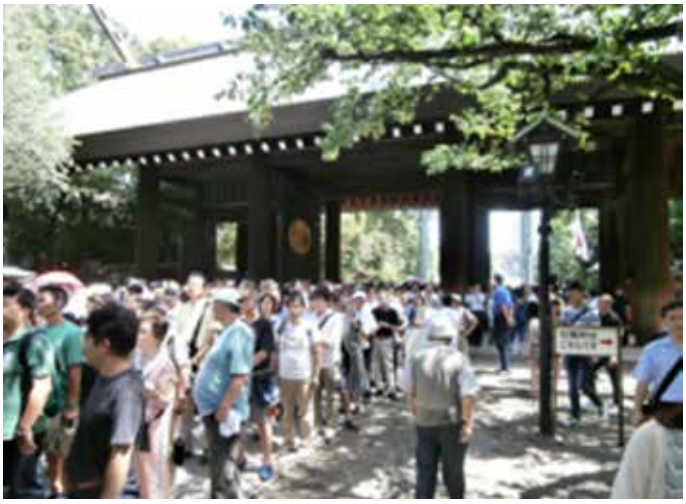
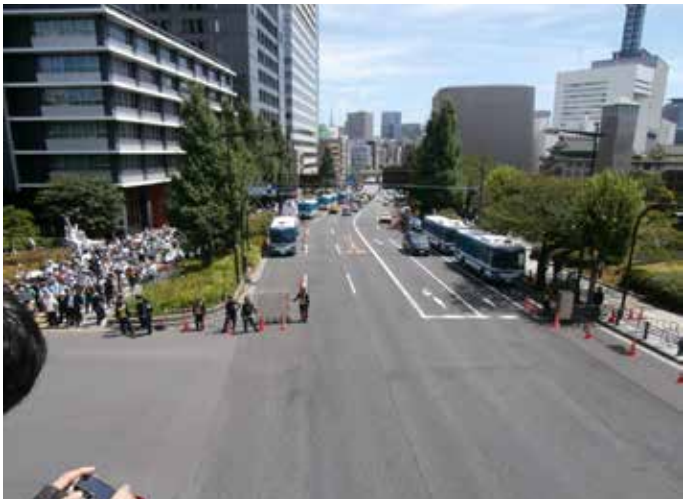




*L: Japanese men donning navy uniforms.*
*R: Banners being paraded by some of Japan's more nationalist worshippers.*

*L. Japanese worshippers lining up inside Yasukuni Jinja to pay their condolences.*
*R. Police buses lining the streets outside the Jinja. On the far left are booths, many distributing nationalist literature.*

brought out a number of men dressed in formal military attire—many far too young to have participated in the battles of Japan's last war in the Asia Pacific— who stood in formation along the outer fringes of the three lines accompanying one individual who appeared old enough to have participated in the war. People had also established booths just outside the shrine to distribute pamphlets on various political issues, some nationalistic and others of concerns not directly related to Japan, such as over the plight of the Chinese religious group Falun Gong.

***Tokyo 2022***

August 15, 2022 in Tokyo featured many of the same events that I witnessed in 2014, but to a lesser scale perhaps also due to Covid-19 concerns. On this occasion I also visited the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery, which proved to be a refreshing contrast to Yasukuni Jinja. The two sites are separated by a mere 15-minute walk, but Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery is a nondenominal site dedicated to the Japanese who failed in their attempts to return from



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the empire after the war.[26] On this day, a modest group of people had assembled. Members of the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP) gave speeches on subjects they felt to be appropriate for the day, such as the need for a nuclear-free world and for the Japanese peace Constitution to be disseminated as a model to the world rather than altered or rewritten. Organizers had prepared flowers for participants to lay at the uninhabited tomb. According to the media, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, had also visited the cemetery on this day to offer a bouquet of flowers and a prayer in the memory of these Japanese.

*The tomb at Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery with members of the Japan Socialist Party dressed in funeral attire sitting to the right.*

Yasukuni Jinja carried themes similar to those I saw seven years previous that glorified Japan's East Asian wars as righteous battles rather than as invasions of Japan's neighbors. As before, people outfitted in military garb mingled with those whose dress better fitted the scorching hot midsummer day to form lines to pay their respects to those who gave of themselves the ultimate sacrifice to their country during the Asia Pacific wars. Outside the confines of the shrine, groups were gathered to advance a wider array of themes, though similar, to those on display during my previous visit. One group advanced Constitution revision—a rewriting of the document to make it a Japanese—rather than a U.S.—authored document. Another booth had been erected by a group that has in the past advocated history textbook revision and published its own textbooks.[27] Yet another booth carried a sign that "thanked the self-defense forces" (*Arigatou jieitai-san*), perhaps with the intention of attracting new recruits. The *Eirei no meiyo wo mamori kenshō suru kai* (The Association to Honor the Glory of the Spirits of the War Dead) advertised a memorial ceremony to be held to honor a Korean air force colonel, Choi Sam-yŏng, who had been trained by the Japanese military, that was scheduled to take place later in the year.[28] Groups instructing on the Chinese oppression of the Uyghur people joined Falun Gong believers and attempted to collect signatures for a petition. Signs also instructed that Taiwan was not a part of China and that textbooks should not spread such lies. One news outlet reported that, while Prime Minister Kishida did not join several of his cabinet members in visiting Yasukuni, he did make a financial contribution to the shrine on this day.[29]

Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, never far from the events of this day, invited mentions both directly and indirectly; peace advocates used the event to advance their anti-nuclear campaign, both themes that were a part of the JSP speeches given at the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery and in speeches that members of the conservative *Kōmeitō* [Clean Party] delivered in front of Ikebukuro Station. Russian belligerence and threats of a possible Chinese attack encouraged calls for Japan to rearm further, and were perhaps also behind the efforts to remind Japanese that Taiwan was a political entity independent of the Chinese mainland.

26 The Sumitomo building (33F) in West Shinjuku maintains the Heiwa Kinen Tenshi Shiryō Kan [Memorial Museum for Soldiers, Detainees in Siberia, and Postwar Repatriates] which is dedicated to telling the story of the Japanese attempts to return from the fallen empire after defeat.

27 The *Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho* [New History Textbook] that this organization published after it was approved by the Ministry of Science and Education has drawn criticism from both Chinese and Korean groups for its revision of Japan's war history, even though very few schools have adopted it.

28 The pamphlet informed that Morohashi Shigeichi, Executive Chair [*jikkō iinchō*]of the Daitoa Seisensai [The Great East Asian Sacred War Festival] and author of *Nihon ga sekai no shokuminchi wo kaihō shita* [Japan Freed the Colonies of the World], would read from Choi's *Nippon ha kiseki no kuni: hannichi wa haji* [Japan is a Miraculous Country: To be Anti-Japanese is Shameful].

29 Elaine Lies (August 15, 2022).



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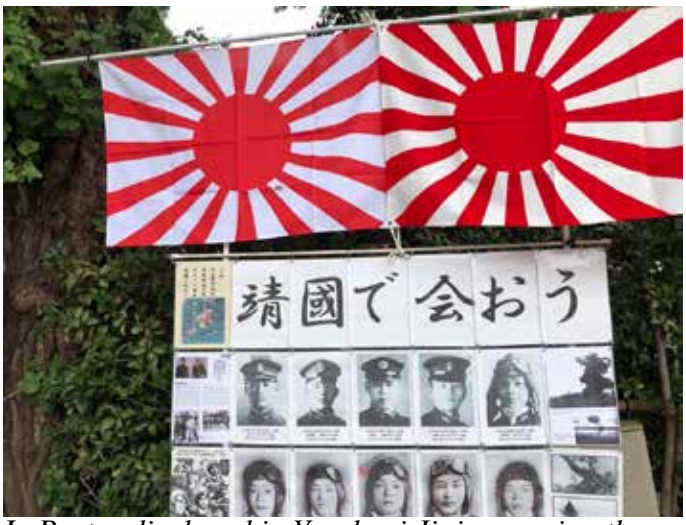
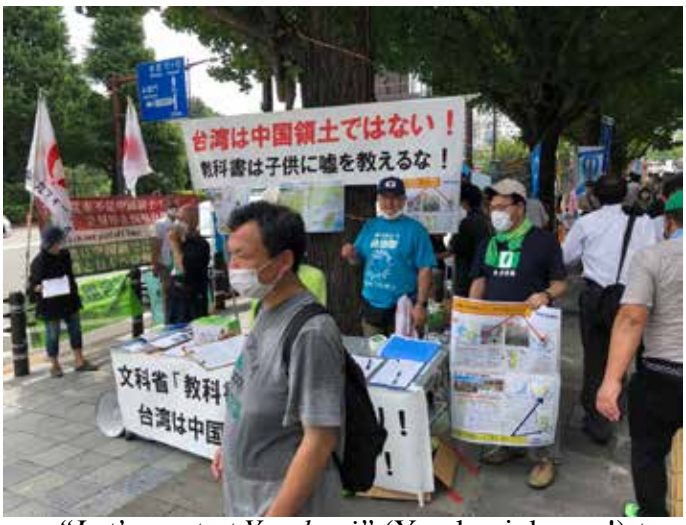
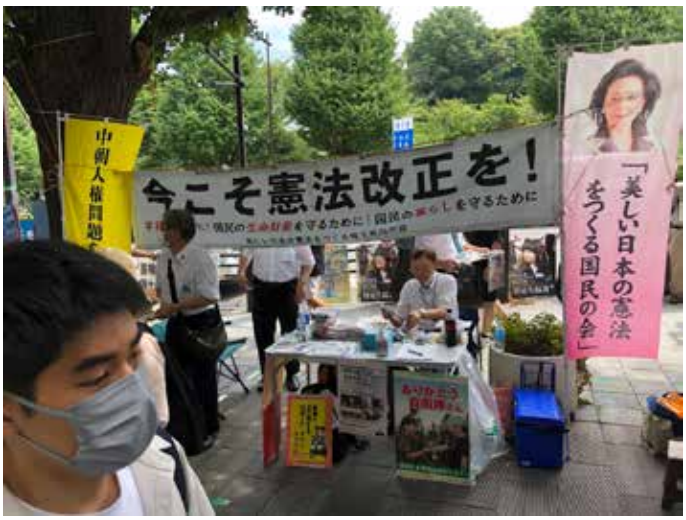



*L. Poster displayed in Yasukuni Jinja carrying the message "Let's meet at Yasukuni"* (Yasukuni de aou!) *to honor Japan's war dead. The flags decorating the poster, previously used by the Japanese Imperial Navy until 1945, have been recently adopted by the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force.*
*R. A booth informing visitors of Taiwan's independence from China can be seen at the rear of the photo.*




*Poster informing that "Now is the time for Constitution Revision!"* (Ima koso kenpō kaisei wo!) *sponsored by the "The People's Association for Beautiful Japan's Constitution Revision"* (Utsukushi Nippon no kenpōkokumin no kai).

August 15 continues to be commemorated by the peoples of both Japan and the two Koreas close to eight decades after the Asian Pacific wars concluded. As with most other wartime issues, the three countries cannot, and will no doubt never, come to agreement, but will continue to disagree on the significance of this day. This is to be expected as many Japanese lament it as the day that ended their crusade to sever dependence ties with the global powers, and rid Asia of Western colonial intruders; the Koreas, on the other hand, commemorate the day as the day they severed ties from the Japanese colonial empire, and in the ROK as the day that their country was founded. Yet they also lament it as this liberation from Japan brought on the beginnings of their divided history. Particularly for the Koreas and for Japanese, the day remains too important to adjust its significance or drop it altogether from their respective national histories, at least for the foreseeable future. Yet, as with the case of most efforts to date a particular event, the significance of August 15 is open to debate. If the date is to be remembered, it perhaps should be seen as the day that initiated a postwar era in which two superpowers came to dominate in a hostile Cold War environment; as a day that forced the Korea and Japan to compromise their foreign and domestic matters to the Allied forces, and to choose sides in the emerging Cold War; or as a day of reflection on past failures, rather than a day to commemorate defeat, liberation, or division.

Though August 15 presents complications regarding the understanding of historical facts for reasons



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outlined above, it remains significant for both the Koreans and the Japanese for its capacity to remind the people of events critical in their respective countries' historical memories—a day of reflection among certain Koreans and a day of shame among certain Japanese. While its meaning has expanded in the Korean case to incorporate issues regarding the ROK's founding, and the start of the Peninsula's divided history following Japan's defeat, in Japan the day remains one that is limited to reminding the Japanese people of the years that preceded 1945, when Japan had risen from its traditional Asian status to stand alongside the other world powers as a modern (powerful) state, a time to which conservative Japanese envision their country returning with inflated military budgets, while others keep alive a crusade for their country to honor its no-military, no-war clause that remains embedded (if for the most part a little more than a symbol) in their postwar Constitution as Article IX.

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## About the Author

**Mark Caprio** *is an Emeritus Professor at Rikkyo University in Tokyo. He is the author of* Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910—1945, *published by the University of Washington Press in August 2009.*



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