

## Korean soldier internees in Siberia and the issue of (un)redressability

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Japanese soldiers returning from Siberia waiting to disembark at Maizuru Harbor, Kyoto Prefecture, Japan in 1946. Source: Public Domain image from Wikipedia. <https://tinyurl.com/returnsoldiersmaizuru>

After the Asian Pacific War, 600 thousand soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army in Manchuria were demilitarized by the USSR Red Army and moved to Siberia, where they were subjected to forced labor for several years. It is said that 60 thousand of these soldiers died between 1945 and 1946. The Japanese government insisted that this incident should be treated as a case of 'internment' since many of the soldiers had been interned illegally after the war. Meanwhile, the USSR government insisted that they were prisoners of war (POWs), arrested legally, and therefore not internees.

The repatriation of these soldiers took place over a span of around 10 years, at 18 repatriation harbors spread out over Japan, the Korean peninsula, Manchuria, mainland China, Siberia, and Taiwan. The most famous of these repatriation harbors is Maizuru Harbor, in Kyoto prefecture, where the Maizuru Repatriation Memorial Museum is located. Interestingly enough, almost all of the museum's exhibitions are about the repatriates from Siberia and not those from China or Korea. This may be because Maizuru Harbor was the last of the repatriation harbors to remain open, where people waited for the repatriates from Siberia. The last repatriation ship from Nakhodka entered into Maizuru Harbor in December 1956.

In addition to the Maizuru Museum exhibitions, the collective memory of internment in Siberia is also presented in hundreds of Japanese books that describe disastrous memories of forced labor, starvation, and death, or address the problem of unpaid wage and other reparations. After 1945, the Japanese government paid full wages to ex-soldiers who had been subjected to forced labor in Australia, New Zealand, and the South-East Asian countries on the grounds

of the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) and the labor certificates that had been issued in the US, UK, Netherlands, and Australia. However, the ex-soldiers who had been interned in Siberia were not paid any wages due to the fact that the USSR government, for a long time, had not issued labor certificates to Japanese ex-soldiers. This unfair treatment acted to augment their terrible memories of internment in Siberia.

Of the Japanese Imperial Army soldiers interned in Siberia, some were from Korea and Taiwan. For a long time after 1945, little was known about the fates of these imperial soldiers from Japan's colonies upon their return to their home land. This changed, however, with the showing of *Siberia in the Memory: My Grandpa's Memory and a Letter from Seoul* (directed by Kubota Keiko), which premiered in October 2016 in Shinjuku and some other cities in Japan. The protagonist, Park Dohung, was born in a poor rural village in northern Korea. In the early 1940s, he joined the Japanese imperial army in order to help his poor family although he had not adopted a Japanese style name. He first went to Yoichi, Hokkaido, to participate in military training and then was sent to Shikotan Island. The war came to an end whilst he was stationed on this island and there he waited for a ship to take him back home. The ship that eventually arrived, however, was a USSR ship that took him, not to Hokkaido, but to the Soviet Union, where soldiers from Korea and Japan were interned in separate camps (according to his recollection). In 1949, he boarded a ship at Nakhodka and landed in Heungnam, located in the territory of North Korea (the border marked by the 38th parallel had almost been fixed by that time). Upon his arrival at Heungnam Harbor, some members of North Korean Labor Party met him with the greeting "Welcome from Socialism Motherland".

As Park Dohung's hometown had been located in North Korea, he had indeed returned home. Soon afterwards, he joined the North Korean Peoples' Army and, when the Korean War broke out in 1950, crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea as a soldier of the Peoples' Army. In South Korea, he was subsequently arrested by the South Korean Army, spent time in a prison camp at Gojaedo Island, and was involved in the South Korean Army for 2 years. Upon discharge from the army, he worked as a piano engineer. In this way, Park Dohung was an ex-soldier of the Japanese Imperial Army, the North Korean Peoples' Army, and the South Korean Army.

Park Dohung's fascinating journey, however, is not an isolated one. There were a great many individuals who were ex-soldiers of all three armies. The 'Shiberia Sakpunghwe' (Siberia North Wind Association) was established in order to address the issue of these ex-soldiers in 1990, just after the summit meeting between Roh Tae-woo and M. S. Gorbachev took place and in the year that South Korea and USSR accomplished diplomatic normalization. Investigations into the experiences of these ex-soldiers were also carried out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the Roh Mu-hyun administration of South Korea. This was followed by the publication of the book *I was a soldier of the Japanese Imperial Army, North Korean Peoples' Army and South Korean UN Army* by Kim Hyosun, a prominent journalist of the newspaper *Hankyoreh*, which addressed the issue of Korean internees in Siberia. Around the same time, a program on Korean internees in Siberia – *Another Internment to Siberia: Korean POWs' 60 years* – was featured on NHK TV of Japan. The Korean ex-internees appearing in this program had been sent to Hailar, in Manchuria, as soldiers of the Kwantung Army around the time that the northern part of Manchuria (including Hailar)

was being abandoned by the Kwantung Army. After the end of the war, they were interned to Krasnoyarsk, in the western area of Lake Baikal, by the Soviet Red Army. Afterwards, they departed from Nakhodka and arrived in Heungnam Harbor, and later crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea at the time of Korean War. It is said that the USSR government at the time had been aware of the existence of some Korean soldiers amongst the Japanese internees in Siberia. However, it had taken a long time to confirm their identity since many of the Korean soldiers had adopted Japanese style names.

Almost all of the Korean internees in Siberia have now passed away and so although some information can still be gained of their histories and experiences, the picture is fragmented and incomplete. About 2300 Korean internees in Siberia made the journey to Heungnam Harbor but only a few of them crossed the 38th parallel and went back home; it is said that almost all of the repatriates remained in North Korea or went to Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in China.

It is open to debate whether, and to what extent, the Korean internees in Siberia were victims or victimizers, given that they had been involved in warfare as soldiers. However, the fact remains that they did not receive any reparations as soldiers from the Japanese government after the war. In addition, some of them became soldiers once again in both North Korea and South Korea. As such, the question of how, and to whom, they are to appeal for redress and reparation still remains.

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