Traitors or Patriots?
Left–Right Polarization within the Korean Community in Postwar Japan

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Abstract

The League of Koreans in Japan (Chae Ilbon Chosŏnin Yŏnmaeng; abbreviated as Choryon 朝連) was officially established on October 15, 1945. In its early days, ideological divisions between left- and right-leaning factions were not yet overt. However, internal struggles for leadership eventually pushed the organization toward alignment with communist forces, leading to its support for the North Korean regime. Although Choryon's founding congress nominally promoted unity across ideological lines, figures such as Kim Chon-hae—known for his anti-Japanese resistance—found it impossible to reconcile with individuals linked to pro-Japanese collaboration. Within a year of Korea's liberation, the community of Koreans residents in Japan had become so deeply polarized that even joint commemoration of the March First Independence Movement became unfeasible. This division only deepened during the Cold War, especially after the establishment of separate governments in North and South Korea. Each faction within the community of Korean residents effectively became a conduit for advancing the unification policies of the respective authoritarian regime it supported.

Keywords: Choryon, ideological division, Korean residents in Japan, Rhee Syngman, Kim Il-sung, March First Movement

The U.S. Occupation of Japan and Policies toward Korean Residents

The ideological conflict between left and right that emerged within the Korean community in Japan after the liberation on August 15, 1945, was deeply rooted in the deterioration of U.S.–Soviet relations following World War II and the United States' unilateral occupation of Japan. Since the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941, the United States had received virtually no military assistance from either Britain or the Soviet Union in its war against Japan. While the Soviet Union paid an immense cost to secure Nazi Germany's surrender, the United States' use of atomic bombs proved decisive in Japan's surrender. Consequently, whereas Germany was jointly occupied by the Soviet Union, the United States, Britain, and France, Japan came under exclusive U.S. control—a scenario envisioned by U.S. policymakers as early as 1943. Even before the end of the war, the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt had sought to implement a unilateral occupation of Japan. In 1944, the State Department formed the Postwar Programs Committee, which in March of that year drafted plans for a nearly exclusive American occupation of Japan (Cha 1992, 293).

By early June 1945, the United States had outlined the basic framework for Japan's occupation: (1) the Japanese Emperor would declare unconditional surrender and order all Japanese military forces to cease operations, (2) the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) would exercise full legislative, judicial, and administrative authority over Japanese territory, and (3) existing Japanese civil and military officials would remain in place to carry out their regular duties to maintain law and order. Based on these principles, the U.S. adopted moderate occupation policies centered on indirect rule, retaining the emperor system through the General Headquarters of SCAP (hereafter GHQ) (Choi 2020, 19).

Meanwhile, U.S.–Soviet tensions escalated. Key developments included Stalin's declaration of rearmament in February 1946 and George Kennan's influential "Long

Telegram" that same month, which laid the groundwork for America's Cold War containment strategy (Gaddis 2005). In March 1946, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill famously warned of an "iron curtain" dividing East and West, underscoring the deepening Cold War. In this shifting geopolitical climate, GHQ's occupation policy toward Japan also shifted from a focus on "democratization" to an emphasis on preventing "communization" after 1947 (Cha 1992, 281).

The United States, having subdued Japanese militarism with atomic weapons and imposed unilateral occupation, wielded overwhelming influence over the post-liberation lives of Koreans in Japan. What does this signify? It means that form and substance of liberation experienced by Koreans in Japan were shaped not only by the U.S.–Soviet relationship but also by American evaluations of Japan's postwar socioeconomic conditions. While Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, ended colonial rule over Korea, the Korean peninsula's division into U.S. and Soviet occupation zones hindered the nation's achievement of full sovereignty. At the same time, Koreans who remained in Japan—now a marginalized ethnic minority—faced even greater challenges in realizing the promise of liberation.

This was largely because GHQ retained the prewar Japanese government, which had actively discriminated against and oppressed Korean residents, as a tool of indirect rule. Furthermore, Allied postwar minority policies prioritized assimilation over autonomy (Choi 2020, 33). As wartime cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union gave way to Cold War confrontation, the Korean peninsula was split into two separate regimes—North and South Korea. Against this backdrop, Korean residents in Japan found themselves subject to a triple burden: imperialist legacies, ethnic discrimination, and anti-communist repression—even after the formal end of colonial rule.

Allied Forced Migration Policies and Korean Residents in Japan after World War II

The United States sought to promote socioeconomic stability in postwar Japanese society by implementing two key

policies regarding ethnic minorities: the repatriation of those willing to return to their homelands and the assimilation of those who remained. This approach was shaped by growing criticism among Allied policymakers of the League of Nations-era minority protection system, especially after the outbreak of World War II.

Following World War I, new nation-states emerged in Central and Eastern Europe based on the principle of national self-determination. In response, the League of Nations introduced an international minority protection system, which guaranteed ethnic minorities equal rights and autonomy in the use of their native languages, as well as in education and religious practices (Choi 2020, 33). However, the system increasingly fell out of favor, especially after Nazi Germany exploited minority rights as a pretext for intervention. As a result, calls to reform the system intensified after World War II. Instead of continuing active protection measures, the Allied powers shifted toward assimilation and both voluntary and forced migration as strategies to eliminate the roots of ethnic conflict.

The postwar policies of the GHQ toward Korean residents in Japan followed this broader trajectory. Repatriation of ethnic minorities to their countries of origin, coupled with enforced assimilation of those who remained, was seen as effective means of addressing ethnic tensions within Japan. GHQ regarded Korean residents in Japan as a socially disruptive and economically unstable group that hindered occupation policies. Accordingly, GHQ classified Korean residents as an ethnic minority who technically retained Japanese nationality, encouraged their repatriation, and called for the assimilation of those who remained (S. Lee 2018, 73).

On the eve of Japan's defeat, the U.S. State Department estimated that of the approximately 1.5 million Koreans expected to reside in Japan after the war, 1.2 million lacked stable livelihoods. Most of them were day laborers in marginal jobs. The State Department predicted that they would not only fail to contribute to Japan's recovery but also exacerbate unemployment and form isolated ethnic enclaves in response to growing Japanese resentment and

hostility (T. Kim 2004, 135). It also assessed that many were employed in construction, factories, and coal mines, lived in slum-like conditions with very low standards of living, and had antagonistic relations with Japanese society—relations that had deteriorated further since the massacre following the Great Kantō Earthquake. Despite the Home Ministry's 1936 initiative promoting Korean–Japanese harmony, the Department concluded that ethnic tensions remained deeply entrenched (T. Kim 2004, 135).

As part of its basic policy, GHQ prioritized the swift repatriation of Korean residents and permitted continued residency only for those deemed "assimilated." Koreans who remained were placed under the supervision and control of the Japanese government. Beginning in December 1945, GHQ authorized the Japanese government to regulate Korean residents and empowered local repatriation offices to use all legal means necessary to manage returnees. Furthermore, on February 19, 1946, citing the need to maintain public order, GHQ endorsed the Japanese government's authority to investigate and prosecute non-Japanese residents. In May of the same year, GHQ clarified its position, stating that Korean residents who did not repatriate would continue to be treated as Japanese nationals until a formal Korean government was established (Yu 2021, 75). In February 1946, GHQ ordered the registration of Korean residents wishing to return to Korea. It planned to complete repatriation of Korean residents to areas south of the 38th parallel by December 28, 1946, and to areas north of the 38th parallel by June 26, 1947, unless further directives were issued (Choi 2020, 23).

Left-Right Conflict Due to the Trusteeship Issue

While GHQ was formulating policies for the repatriation and assimilation of Koreans in Japan, the Korean peninsula was engulfed in a sharp left-right conflict over the proposed trusteeship and was experiencing setbacks in the U.S.–Soviet Joint Commission. The Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers, held from December 16 to 28, 1945, agreed on a four-power trusteeship for Korea (Shim 1999, 31). The resulting Moscow Agreement, signed on December

17, proposed the establishment of the U.S.–Soviet Joint Commission in Korea to deliberate on the implementation of the trusteeship during an interim period.

The commission's objective was to facilitate the creation of a democratic provisional government in Korea and to devise plans for post-liberation governance. It was envisioned as a mechanism to oversee the trusteeship in consultation with a Korean provisional government, aiming to preserve a balance between the two superpowers and prevent direct confrontation over the strategically less significant Korean peninsula—a strategy that might be described as "deterrence through cooperation." Although American officials doubted that the trusteeship could be successfully implemented—or that any real compromise with the Soviet Union on the Korean issue was feasible—they were unable to shift their official their stance (C. Lee 2006, 21). Trapped between policy and reality, they continued to closely monitor developments in Korea in connection with the broader context of the Chinese civil war.

Following the announcement of the trusteeship, political forces in North and South Korea quickly polarized into pro- and anti-trusteeship camps. Initially, both left-wing and right-wing groups opposed the plan. However, when the left shifted its position and began supporting the trusteeship just days later, a deep divide emerged. In Seoul, false information circulated claiming that the United States supported, while the Soviet Union advocated trusteeship. This fueled strong anti-trusteeship and anti-Soviet sentiment.

Many viewed the Moscow Agreement as Soviet-led colonial trusteeship, branding support for it as unpatriotic (C. Lee 2006, 15). As the anti-trusteeship movement increasingly framed itself as an anti-Soviet and nationalist cause, it drew support from pro-Japanese collaborators and anti-communist forces. South of the 38th parallel, figures like Kim Gu and former members of the Provisional Government swiftly established the National Mobilization Committee against Trusteeship and launched a vigorous opposition campaign. They characterized their resistance as a "second independence movement," labeling supporters of the Moscow Agreement as national traitors (Shim 1999, 33). When Kim

Gu, as part of the anti-trusteeship movement, called for a general strike by Koreans under the U.S. Military Government, American authorities interpreted it as an attempted coup and demanded its cancellation (Okada 2015, 22).

Meanwhile, the Korean Communist Party attempted to use the anti-trusteeship movement as an opportunity to foster left-right cooperation, viewing such collaboration as the optimal path toward national unification. It even proposed reunifying the splintered nationalist and leftist movements. However, Kim Gu and his allies flatly rejected these overtures. In response, the Communist Party denounced Kim Gu and Rhee Syngman as fascists and sought to forge alliances with centrist readers such as Lyuh Woon-hyung and Kim Kyu-sik to promote left–right cooperation. However, as Pak Hon-yong publicly endorsed the trusteeship after returning from a visit to Pyongyang, Kim Gu and Rhee Syngman solidified their alliance by forming the Korean Independence Promotion National Association. While the South grew increasingly fractured over the trusteeship issue, the North's political climate began consolidating around Kim Il-sung. Although Cho Man-sik opposed the trusteeship, after being placed under house arrest in January 1946, right-wing nationalist resistance in the North was effectively neutralized, allowing Kim Il-sung to consolidate power as the principal Soviet-aligned leader.

By the time the First U.S.–Soviet Joint Commission convened on March 20, 1946, the Korean peninsula was already deeply divided, particularly in the South, where a fierce left–right confrontation was underway. Rhee Syngman maintained a consistent stance against trusteeship, while the Korean Independence Party rapidly expanded its influence by leveraging the anti-trusteeship movement. During the Joint Commission's sessions, the anti-trusteeship faction prioritized abolishing the 38th parallel and promoting inter-Korean exchange as their primary objective. This position aligned with the U.S. strategic approach to the commission, which emphasized opposing trusteeship without formally rejecting the Moscow Agreement.

Although the Soviet Union appeared to soften its position on April 18 by agreeing to include anti-trusteeship groups in the consultations, the commission soon reached an impasse,

leading to an indefinite recess declared on May 9. Around this time, on March 23, the North Korean Provisional People's Committee led by Kim Il-sung announced a sweeping 20-point program, which included major land reforms. Meanwhile, in the South, Rhee Syngman delivered his "Jeongeup speech" on June 3, advocating for the formation of a separate southern government and articulating anti-Soviet and anti-communist views.

The Trusteeship Issue and Violent Clashes among Korean Residents in Japan

In the immediate aftermath of Japan's defeat, Korean residents in Japan needed to negotiate with both the Japanese government and GHQ to address pressing issues such as repatriation and the protection of their lives and property. This situation spurred the formation and eventual unification of Korean resident organizations. In the early post-liberation period, more than 300 Korean-led organizations emerged across Japan. To consolidate these scattered organizations and lay the groundwork for a unified national body, the Central Preparatory Committee for the Formation of the League of Koreans in Japan was established on September 10, 1945. Just over a month later, on October 15, the League of Koreans in Japan (hereafter Choryon) was officially founded (I. Kim 2016, 69).

At this early stage, ideological divisions between the left and right were not yet prominent. The preparatory committee reflected a diversity of political backgrounds: Cho Duseong, a nationalist Korean-American served as chairman; Kwon Il, a former pro-Japanese collaborator, was appointed vice-chairman; and Kim Jeong-hong, a communist, also held a vice-chairman position (Okada 2016, 25). Thus, both nationalists and communists were represented in Choryon's initial leadership. The organization's early activities focused primarily on livelihood issues, particularly repatriation. Choryon declared in its platform a commitment to "promoting convenience and order for repatriating compatriots." Korean

residents, who needed a reliable point of support in postwar Japanese society, supported Choryon, seeing it as the first organization formed to represent them (Ch'oe 2012, 343).

Choryon's founding convention was held on October 15 at Tokyo's Hibiya Public Hall, drawing around 4,000 participants from across Japan (I. Kim 2016, 69). At the convention, Choryon stated its organizational purpose as "enlightening and guiding Korean residents in Japan to have pride as liberated independent nationals." A six-point platform was adopted, outlining the organization's goals: (1) Commit to building a new Korea; (2) Strive for lasting world peace; (3) Stabilize Korean residents' livelihoods in Japan; (4) Ensure smooth and orderly repatriation; (5) Pursue mutual prosperity with the Japanese people; and (6) Foster unity among Korean residents to achieve these goals.

In its early years, Choryon focused on compiling lists of repatriates, issuing return certificates, managing property left behind, offering daily life consultations, supporting Korean language education, and addressing urgent livelihood needs. These activities reflected a commitment to protecting Korean residents' rights and facilitating repatriation, regardless of political affiliation. In addition, Choryon invested enormous funds to build ethnic schools that would teach Korean language and history, and by October 1946, 539 such schools were operating nationwide.

Though Choryon began as a social welfare organization, internal power struggles eventually led it to adopt a more leftist stance, and over time, it came to align closely with the North Korean regime. According to Japanese police surveillance records on Korean residents in Japan, the period from February 19, 1946 to September 8, 1949, marked Choryon's "golden age," during which it expanded its reach, absorbed the majority of Korean residents in Japan, and became "the vanguard of the Japan Communist Party" (S. Lee 2018, 79). During this period, Yun Hyeok served as chairman, with Kim Jeong-hong and Kim Min-hwa as vice-chairmen. Han Deok-su, then the head of Kanagawa prefecture, was appointed General Affairs Director at Choryon's second national convention. Another key figure was Kim Chon-hae (May 10, 1898–?), a committed communist who had been

imprisoned for his activism in the Japan Communist Party and later became a high-ranking official in North Korea. He was named as an advisor to Choryon.

Kim Chon-hae's role is particularly noteworthy. Before liberation, he had been imprisoned in Tokyo's Fuchu Prison alongside 16 communists, including leading Japan Communist Party members Tokuda Kyūichi and Shiga Yoshio. Upon his release, Kim co-founded the Japan Communist Party Expansion and Strengthening Committee with six fellow inmates who had not renounced their ideology and became a central figure in Japan's postwar socialist movement. He was elected to the Japan Communist Party Central Committee, served as its Korean Affairs Director, and joined the Central Committee of the Democratic National Front. In February 1947, he was elevated to the Japan Communist Party Central Committee Politburo. At Choryon's Fifth Congress in October 1948, Kim was appointed to lead the delegation celebrating the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. After moving to North Korea in 1950, he held numerous senior roles, including Education Director of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee, Chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly Standing Committee, Foreign Liaison Director of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee, and Chairman of the Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland (DFRF).

Three other Koreans, including Yi Kang-hun—who later became a Workers' Party Central Committee member and a deputy of the Supreme People's Committee after entering North Korea in 1949—had been imprisoned alongside Kim Chon-hae. Thanks to his close ties with Japan Communist Party leadership within Choryon, Kim was able to steer the organization toward official support for the "People's Republic." Before Choryon's formal establishment, he received prison visits from communists Kim Jeong-hong and Kim Tu-yong, during which they discussed how Choryon could serve the goals of Japan Communist Party reconstruction and revolutionary struggle—ideas shared with Tokuda and Shiga Yoshio during their incarceration.

Korean residents in Japan had been watching for Kim Chon-hae's release, especially after the release of political

prisoners began on October 1, 1945. Just days before Choryon's national convention, he was freed from Fuchu Prison on October 10. Hundreds of Koreans gathered to welcome him, including members of the preparatory committee, who carried banners proclaiming, "Welcome Release of Liberation Warrior." In his speech to the crowd, Kim called for the eradication of Japanese imperialism and militarism, the establishment of a workers' and farmers' government, and complete independence of Korea through a democratic government.

Newspapers accounts estimated that 2,000 to 3,000 people—mostly Koreans—attended the October 15 convention, underlining Kim's growing influence among Korean residents in Japan. Following the event, participants marched through central Tokyo to GHQ's office in Chiyoda Ward, chanting slogans for Korean independence. This demonstration is recorded as the first mass rally in Tokyo following Japan's surrender.

Left–Right Confrontation at the Choryon Founding Convention

The founding convention of the Choryon, held at Hibiya Public Hall in October 1945, outwardly promoted a left–right coalition. However, efforts to unify figures with anti-Japanese resistance backgrounds, such as Kim Chon-hae, and those with histories of pro-Japanese collaboration encountered significant challenges. From the outset, the issue of purging pro-Japanese collaborators and so-called "national traitors" ignited tensions between left and right factions, culminating in violent incidents during the founding convention.

On October 16, the second day of the convention, leftist youth led by the communist Kim Tu-yong stormed the venue just before proceedings began. They distributed the inaugural issue of *Minjung Sinmun* (dated October 15), which featured articles denouncing pro-Japanese collaborators and demanding their expulsion from the organization. Inside the hall, slogans erupted: "Punish the national traitors," "No forgiveness for the Kyōwakai and Ilsimhoe," and "Completely eliminate pro-Japanese collaborators and national traitors

from Choryon." At the time, twelve central figures, including Choryon's Central Chairman Yun Geun, had traveled to Seoul to meet with Pak Hon-yong. That day's convention was marked not only by hostility toward collaborators but also by open support for the People's Republic in the north and calls for radical action—statements such as "Rhee Syngman and Kim Gu should both be killed" were voiced without restraint. One participant later asserted: "When we went to South Korea, we saw that the People's Republic had been established and that all South Koreans were supporting it" (*Dong-A Ilbo* 1972).

Amid the turmoil, leftist youth physically attacked Kwon Il, who was chairing the convention, accusing him of being a "pro-Japanese reactionary." Kwon (August 22, 1911–April 3, 2001) was a politician who had served as a legal official in Manchukuo during Japanese colonial rule. He later became head of the Korean Residents Union in Japan in 1950 and served as a National Assembly member in South Korea during the Yusin period. One participant involved in the attack recalled: "We couldn't forgive those who had so recently supported Japan's colonial rule of Korea and shouted 'Long live the Emperor' now turning around and saying, 'Let's build a new Korea.' So we delivered heavenly punishment." In contrast, Kwon later reflected that the split between left and right had begun even before the Choryon's founding convention. He noted that the atmosphere at the convention hall was already leaning left and attributed the organizational split and ideological clash to the leftist faction.

According to Kwon, senior members of the Japan Communist Party had been frequenting the preparatory committee of Choryon, forming ties with communists like Kim Jeong-hong and Kim Tu-yong, and engaging in political agitation. When a mass welcome event was proposed for recently released communists—including Kim Chon-hae and prominent Japan Communist Party leaders Tokuda Kyūichi and Shiga YYoshio—leftist members like Kim Jeong-hong argued that Choryon should act as host. However, Kwon Il opposed the idea, stating, "We Koreans, having achieved liberation, are no longer Japanese nationals. There is absolutely no reason for us to host a welcome party for

Japan Communist Party members." He also objected to calls at the welcome rally for the overthrow of the Japanese emperor system, arguing, "We Koreans have nothing to do with whether Japan retains its emperor system or not. We cannot host such a mass convention." In contrast, Kim Tu-yong contended that "ultimately, Korean affairs must be guided toward completing Japan's progressive democratic revolution," emphasizing that "Choryon should be cultivated as a political organization and led as one of Japan's communist revolutionary forces."

Traitor vs. Traitor: Violent Clashes at the Second Choryon National Convention (the "Nagata Incident")

By early 1946, support for the People's Republic among Koreans in Japan had become closely associated with support for trusteeship plan. This linkage deepened the ideological rift between left- and right-wing factions. In mid-January, as anti-trusteeship protests intensified in South Korea, the People's Republic was being pushed underground. Meanwhile, in North Korea, communist forces led by Kim Il-sung were consolidating their power by sidelining nationalist elements.

In this context, Choryon leaders—many of whom maintained close ties with the Japan Communist Party—endorsed the People's Republic and expressed support for trusteeship. They defended their stance by arguing that, once fully understood, the trusteeship actually served the cause of Korean independence. From their perspective, the decisions made at the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers reaffirmed, rather than denied, the vague promise of Korean independence articulated in the Cairo and Potsdam Declarations, now offering a concrete path toward establishing a sovereign Korean state.

The Second Extraordinary General Convention of Choryon, held from February 27 to 28, 1946, marked a turning point. During the convention, an incident involving the expulsion of pro-Japanese collaborators exposed the rising tension and sparked the organization of right-wing youth groups in opposition to Choryon. As Choryon's support for the decisions made at the Moscow Conference became public,

many Koreans withdrew and joined right-wing organizations. One such group, the Youth League for the Promotion of Korean Independence (hereafter Kŏnch'ŏng), had been formed earlier on November 16, 1945, under anti-communist slogans in response to Choryon's alliance with the Japan Communist Party. However, Kŏnch'ŏng also faced criticism for including individuals who had been complicit with Japanese rule. Another development followed the release of the anarchist Pak Yol from Akita Prison. Around him, the League for the Establishment of a New Korea (hereafter Kŏndong) was formed on February 10, 1946. Later, on October 3, 1946, this organization was restructured as the Korean Residents Union in Japan (Mindan), with Kŏnch'ŏng joining as its youth wing.

At the February convention, Choryon made its political orientation explicit. Those identified as right-wing and pro-Japanese were systematically excluded. The organization soon became entangled in physical clashes with right-wing groups such as Kŏnch'ŏng and Kŏndong. The convention not only affirmed its support for the "Korean People's Republic," but also adopted an increasingly aggressive stance toward right-wing groups and pro-Japanese collaborators. In response, Kŏnch'ŏng held its own founding ceremony on November 16, celebrating the release of Pak Yol and Yi Kang-hun from prison, and denounced the increasingly leftist Choryon as a group of national traitors (Ch'oe 2012, 366).

Around late December 1945, shortly after Kŏnch'ŏng was formed, news reached Koreans in Japan that a trusteeship plan—seen by many as contrary to Korean independence—would soon be implemented. Kŏnch'ŏng swiftly resolved to oppose it. In mid-January 1946, Yi Kang-hun returned to Tokyo after meeting with Kim Gu in Seoul, carrying a personal letter from him. On February 4, he instructed Kŏnch'ŏng's Jeon Du-su to organize large-scale anti-trusteeship demonstrations in Tokyo. Given the prevailing desire for immediate independence, opposition to trusteeship was a natural stance for many Koreans in both Korea and Japan.

Kŏnch'ŏng's propaganda department circulated a pamphlet titled "Appeal to Korean Compatriots," which condemned pro-trusteeship factions as traitors and accused

those promoting the "non-existent People's Republic" and supporting trusteeship as "national traitors." On February 14, Kŏnch'ŏng's Central Committee issued a statement accusing Choryon of abandoning its original mission by siding with the communists and misleading the Korean community, declaring: "We strongly protest together with Korean compatriots in Japan and urge its reflection" (*Dong-A Ilbo* 1972).

Eventually, the intense confrontation between left- and right-wing factions over trusteeship culminated in violence. The trusteeship issue dominated the agenda at Choryon's Second General Convention on February 27, which brought together 487 delegates from across Japan. Initially, Choryon's communist leadership had voiced opposition to the trusteeship. However, on the eve of the convention, they abruptly reversed their position—reportedly following instructions from the Japan Communist Party—and came out in favor of trusteeship. Facing this sudden shift of stance, the communist-led presidium attempted to restore order by claiming they would oppose the trusteeship plan in the name of the convention and announced a recess to review the draft of the anti-trusteeship statement. At this point, a major incident occurred where a delegate advocating anti-trusteeship opened fire. Jeong Cheol, a delegate from Tokyo's Fourth District, and Kim Jae-hwa, chair of the Akita Prefecture chapter, harshly criticized Choryon's leadership for their sudden pro-trusteeship stance and alignment with communist ideology. Jeong asked, "Why did Choryon, which began as a social organization, come to take on political coloring?" and criticized the pro-trusteeship faction, saying, "Are those who oppose Choryon traitors? There are Communist spies on the platform."

During the recess, Jeong Chan-jin and Yi Mun-yeol distributed anti-trusteeship flyers throughout the hall. Members of Choryon's leftist action squads, allegedly following leadership orders, detained them, claiming they were armed. The two were tied up and brought to the stage (*Dong-A Ilbo* 1972). As tensions intensified, Kim Jae-hwa (later head of Mindan and a National Assembly member for the New Democratic Party) called for the punishment of these "conspirators." Choryon Vice-Chairman Kim Jeong-hong (who

later moved to North Korea and became mayor of Sinuiju) proposed holding "a people's trial." When the situation grew more volatile, Jeong Cheol intervened, questioning the legitimacy of the trial and asking, "What crime deserves death?" At that moment, someone shouted, "He's one of them too—get him!" The action squad attacked Jeong. As they grabbed him by the collar, he drew a pistol and warned, "Let go, or I'll shoot." As Jeong Chan-jin and Yi Mun-yeol attempted to flee, the action squad hurled flowerpots from the balcony, injuring Jeong Chan-jin. Bleeding, he was handed the pistol by Jeong Cheol, who said, "I'm fine. You take this," before escaping outside. On the road, he encountered U.S. military police, pleaded for protection in English, and narrowly avoided capture by boarding a U.S. military vehicle.

The violent events—later known as the Nagata Incident—occurred in the auditorium of Nagata Elementary School. In the aftermath, most right-wing members either left or were expelled from Choryon. The pro-trusteeship resolution, pushed through by Choryon's communist leadership the day after the incident, marked a decisive turning point. For many moderates and undecided members, the Nagata Incident laid bare the true direction of Choryon, prompting their final withdrawal.

The Legacy of Internal Division

The first March 1st Movement commemoration held after the February 1946 "Nagata Incident" bloodshed was marked by division, with left- and right-leaning groups holding separate events—echoing the political climate in South Korea. Choryon hosted a "March 1st Revolution Commemoration People's Rally" at the large plaza in Hibiya Park, while Kŏnch'ŏng and Kŏndong jointly held a "March 1st Independence Movement Commemoration" at the Hibiya Public Hall.

From the perspective of 2025—the 80th anniversary of Korea's liberation—this separation reminds us of a painful reality: that Korean residents in Japan, despite having suffered some of the harshest oppression, could not unite in

commemorating their nation's independence movement. The emergence of Choryon and the polarization of Korean society in Japan between 1945 and 1946 are developments that elicit feelings of regret, disappointment, frustration, emptiness, anger, and remorse. This division was inseparable from the geopolitical dynamics of the global Cold War, which thwarted Korea's pursuit of true independent sovereignty in the aftermath of liberation.

When it comes to the liberation of the Korean peninsula from colonial rule, both the left and the right had their achievements to claim. However, it is impossible to clearly separate the contributions of one side as definitively greater than the other. In the midst of this confusion, where it was difficult to determine which group played a more significant role, both sides turned on each other, accusing one another of treason. They became fixated on power struggles and expanding their influence, which ultimately led to conflict. In a situation where Korea could not independently determine the direction and nature of its own postliberation independence, this rigid—on both the left and the right—was a mistake. The Cold War-era Korean society in Japan, already divided and no longer able to jointly commemorate the March 1st Movement, became even more fractured after the creation of separate governments in North and South Korea. Each community became a vehicle for the propaganda and unification policies of the respective authoritarian governments they supported, further deepening the divide. As a result, they were unable to effectively address the discrimination and other challenges Koreans faced while living in Japan.

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