

The Reality of the Mobilization of Koreans During World War II

– An analysis based on statistics and written records

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Abstract

In 1965, Japan and South Korea normalized their diplomatic relations and Japan paid South Korea 300 million dollars with no strings attached in accordance with the Agreement Concerning the Settlement of Problems in Regard to Property and Claims and Economic Cooperation. With this payment, both countries confirmed that all post-war claims, including for Koreans who participated in wartime mobilization, had been settled “completely and finally.” Some refer to the wartime mobilization of people based on the laws of the time as an inhumane form of “slave labor.” This paper sheds light on the reality of the wartime mobilization of Korean workers by analyzing official statistics and written records, showing that there are layers of untruth to descriptions of young men forcibly being taken from peaceful farm villages to work as slaves.

Japan governed Korea for nearly 35 years, from September 1910 to August 1945. In 1965, 20 years after Japan’s defeat in the Second World War and the end of Japanese rule over Korea, Japan and South Korea normalized their diplomatic relations by concluding a number of agreements, including the Treaty on Basic Relations and the Agreement Concerning the Settlement of Problems in Regard to Property and Claims and Economic Cooperation. At that time, Japan paid South Korea 300 million dollars with no strings attached in accordance with the agreement. With this payment, both countries confirmed that all post-war claims, including for Koreans who participated in wartime mobilization, had been settled “completely and finally.”

Fifty-three years have passed since the signing of the treaties. Since the end of Japanese rule in Korea, 73 years have elapsed—a period that is more than twice the duration of that rule. Nonetheless, a South Korean court is currently handling a compensation lawsuit filed by “former conscripted workers,” who worked for Japanese firms in Japan as wartime-mobilized workers during the colonial period, and their descendants.

Some refer to the wartime mobilization of people based on the laws of the time as an inhumane form of “slave labor.” Yet this is not the truth. In this paper, I will shed light on the reality of the wartime mobilization of workers, by analyzing official statistics and written records.

The Wartime Mobilization of Koreans As Recounted by Statistics

The expression “wartime mobilization of Koreans” refers to the sending of Korean laborers from Korea to Japan (and Sakhalin, then called Karafuto, as well as islands in the Southern Pacific) in accordance with the Plan for Sending Koreans to Japan, which was created in 1939 based on the National Mobilization Law. The mobilization of soldiers and people working for the military is sometimes added to this definition. The people who were mobilized were sent to work at private-sector companies, where they were paid relatively high wages usually based on the

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terms of their time-limited contracts of employment.

At the end of 1938, which was the 29th year since Japan's annexation of Korea, the Korean population in Japan was 800,000 (according to Ministry of Home Affairs statistics; all figures until 1944 are from this source). We should realize that a great number of Koreans were already living in Japan before the start of wartime mobilization. The population of Koreans in Japan before the start of mobilization was almost 50 percent greater than the 550,000 who remained in Japan after World War II.

Incidentally, the Korean population in Japan in 1911, the year after the annexation, was no more than some 2,500, but it rapidly increased to about 30,000 in 1920, ten years after the annexation, and about 300,000 in 1930, another decade on.

Now, what was the Korean population in Japan in August 1945? No accurate statistics exist, but Yoshio Morita, who was an authority on this issue, estimated that there were about 2 million Koreans in the following way. (The data is from Ministry of Home Affairs statistics.) "The general Korean population at the end of 1944 was 1,911,409 (excluding Sakhalin), with many evacuating to Korea when the air-raids on Japan started in 1945. The statistics until May show that the number of Koreans going back to Korea outnumbered those going to Japan by more than 10,000. After that, ferry services were more or less suspended, so the number of Koreans in Japan at the end of the war was about 2 million, taking into consideration the natural increase in population, and adding soldiers." (Yoshio Morita, *Sūji ga kataru zai-Nichi Kankoku-Chōsenjin no rekishi* [The History of Koreans in Japan in Numbers]).

By the end of 1938, a year before the start of the wartime mobilization of Koreans, 800,000 Koreans were living in Japan. This number increased to around 2 million by August 1945. Does this mean that the difference of 1.2 million Koreans were brought to Japan as part of wartime mobilization? Nothing could be further from the truth.

Eighty Percent of the Koreans Came to Work in Japan Voluntarily

When the war ended, there were 322,890 Koreans employed at locations designated for mobilized workers, according to a survey by the Demobilization Bureau. At the end of the war, there were 112,718 Korean soldiers and other military personnel in Japan, who were not included in the statistics for mobilized workers. This gives a total of 435,608 Koreans, which corresponds to about 22% of the 2 million Koreans in Japan at the end of the war. That figure is equal to about 36% of the 1.2 million increase in the Korean population in Japan that happened during the wartime mobilization.

At the end of the war, only about 20% of the Koreans in Japan were working at locations for mobilized workers. What does this mean?

It means that about 80% of the 2 million Koreans who were in Japan at the end of the war had emigrated of their own volition. More precisely, 80% of the Korean population in Japan at the end of the war had either emigrated voluntarily or were the children of those who had remained in Japan voluntarily. In other words, the overwhelming majority of Koreans who traveled to Japan during the wartime mobilization period from 1939 to August 1945 did so outside the framework of the mobilization plan or chose to live in Japan of their own volition after ending their employment at private-sector companies that had been designated for mobilized workers.

In order to understand the significance of these figures, and to get at the truth, we must first understand the reality of the Koreans who moved to Japan before wartime mobilization.

Many people moved from the Korean peninsula to Japan during the 35 years of colonial rule and especially during the years between 1921 and the end of World War II. In September 1923, groundless rumors that spread in the aftermath of the Great Kantō Earthquake led to the tragic killing of Koreans in quake-stricken areas at the hands of vigilantes. However, the Korean population in Japan, which had been 60,000 in 1922, continued to rapidly increase to 80,000 in

1923, when the earthquake occurred, and to 120,000 in 1924, indicating that the flow of people from Korea did not stop.

Most of the people moving to Japan from Korea were migrant workers and their families.

In fact, this movement of migrant workers did not end during wartime mobilization, but rather surged. In order to understand this, we must first acknowledge that there were many workers who migrated from Korea to Japan many years before the start of wartime mobilization.

Explosive Population Growth in Korea under Japanese Rule

What was the reason for this gigantic flow of migrant workers? There were three causes. First, the number of Korean people grew explosively under Japanese rule. The Korean population was 13 million in 1910 when Japanese rule commenced, and it had grown to more than 29 million by the end of World War II. There were 25 million Koreans in Korea, 2 million in Japan, 2 million in Manchuria and North China, and 1 million in the Soviet Union.

Second, life was harsh in the Korean farm villages where most of the population growth happened.

Third, at the time, Japan had a demand for labor that could accommodate numerous migrant workers. Labor was needed in the cities, mines, and factories of Japan, so anyone who could pay the travel expenses could make a living in the country. Due to the short distance, it was possible to frequently go back and forth between Korea and Japan. The number of people making the journey every year was more than 100,000 from 1925.

The Endless Stream of Illegal Immigrants

The arrival of a large number of undereducated Korean farmers with insufficient Japanese language skills caused various forms of friction with Japanese society. Moreover, when Japan entered a recession, some Japanese workers lost their jobs to Koreans. As will be discussed more in detail in the next section, there were Koreans who escaped wartime mobilization when it started and hindered the execution of the mobilization plan by finding employment in Japanese non-military industries. As such, the Japanese government implemented administrative measures to severely restrict the movement of people from Korea.

Statistics from the Government-General of Korea show that 163,760 workers and their families were stopped from traveling to Japan at Busan and other departure points between 1925 and 1937 because they did not have the required certificates or otherwise failed to meet the prescribed conditions. Furthermore, between 1933 and 1938, as many as 727,094 were stopped in their hometowns, that is, their areas of residence in Korea. Between 1933 and 1937, for which we have statistics, 1,087,563 applications to go to Japan were submitted (including re-submissions), of which roughly 60%, or 651,878, were rejected. The acceptance rate was about 40%, or less than half.

There was also a constant flow of persons who entered illegally without completing the formal procedures. Measures to send back illegal immigrants to Korea were enforced in Japan. Statistics from the Ministry of Home Affairs show that as many as 39,482 illegal border crossers were found in Japan between 1930 and 1942; 33,535 of them were deported.

Of special relevance is that 22,800 illegal immigrants (equal to 58% of all illegal border crossers who were discovered between 1930 and 1942) were discovered and 19,250 (equal to 57% of all those who were deported between 1930 and 1942) were sent home from 1939 to 1942, which indicates that the number of illegal border crossers actually surged during wartime mobilization. The Japanese government forcibly sent home about 20,000 Korean illegal border crossers in the 4-year period for which we have statistics. The mobilization of Koreans for work in Japan was conducted based on procedures established by law, and illegal immigrants who attempted to find work outside of the established legal frameworks were deported. This fact was common

knowledge back then, but it is all but forgotten today. This is the key to understanding wartime mobilization.

Illegal Immigrants Were Deported

I have pointed out that measures were implemented against illegal immigrants during the same period that Korean workers were mobilized to work in Japan, with about 20,000 being sent back to Korea during the period from 1939 to 1942, for which we have statistics.

Looking at records of these illegal border crossings, those wanting to go to Japan paid brokers to be stowaways on small boats, forged travel certificates, pretended to be Japanese, or crossed over as sailors or fishermen and then escaped.

Note that there were many illegal immigrants who pretended to be mobilized workers as soon as wartime mobilization started. Illegal immigrants trying to pass themselves off as mobilized workers were typically 1) those who struck deals with others who were actually supposed to be mobilized and were given copies of their family registry, 2) those who answered the call to mobilization by taking the place of somebody absent, and 3) those who sneaked in with groups of mobilized workers when the persons in charge were not looking. They would then escape as soon as the group arrived in Japan.

The Early Phase of Mobilization and Recruitment: Four Times as Many Migrant Workers as Recruited Workers

We have so far looked at the situation before wartime mobilization. Based on that, I would now like to examine the reality of the wartime mobilization of workers. We can divide this period into the early “mobilization” phase from 1939 to January 1942 and the later “government-mediated recruitment” and “conscription” phases from February 1942 to August 1945. Let us first have an overview of the early period.

The National Mobilization Law was promulgated in April 1938, ramping up the systematic mobilization of materials and labor needed for the war effort. In 1939, the following year, a major labor mobilization under the National Conscription Order began in Japan, but this order did not apply to Korea. Instead, Korean workers were mobilized through a recruitment process that started in September 1939.

This was a recruitment of workers in areas designated by the Government-General, carried out by businesses producing coal and operating mines in support of the war effort with the approval of the Ministry of Health and Welfare as well as the Government-General. The recruited workers traveled to Japan in groups led by their new employers or their representatives. As they were traveling in groups, the difficulties of individual travel, including the need for individual travel certificates and individual inspections at the points of departure, were greatly reduced.

This mobilization through recruitment continued until January 1942. Let us ignore the numbers for January 1942 and get an overview of the situation during the recruitment phase. I want to examine the statistics for the years from 1939 to 1941.

The Korean population in Japan increased rapidly during this period. It was 799,878 at the end of 1938, but it had increased by 80% to 1,469,230 by the end of 1941. This was an increase of 669,352, or almost 670,000 people. Since the natural increase in the population was 81,105, the number of Koreans migrating must have been 588,247 or about 590,000. Of these, the number of recruited workers were 147,136, or about 150,000, according to Ministry of Health and Welfare statistics, which is 25% of the total.

This means that about 440,000, or 75% of the migrant increase, consisted of people who voluntarily traveled to Japan outside the framework of wartime mobilization. In other words, the number of migrant workers who went to Japan by themselves was three times larger than the number of wartime-mobilized workers. It was possible for individuals to make applications to

migrate even after the start of the recruitment phase. Note that 15,549 illegal immigrants were discovered and deported in this same period.

It is understandable that a large number of Koreans went to Japan in search of high-wage jobs as the labor shortage grew more serious in the wartime economy of Japan. There was a huge outflow of people from Korea. Of those people, only 1 in 4 came within the regulatory framework of wartime mobilization.

There was a shortage of young men in Japan due to military conscription, which was aggravated by the labor mobilization that started in Japan in 1939. This created a considerable labor shortage that caused the wages of young male workers to soar.

Neither military conscription nor labor conscription initially applied to Korea, so there remained quite a surplus of young male Korean workers. These young men headed for Japan in search of high wages, just like water flows from high to low. This is what generated the flow of 600,000 migrant workers over a 3-year period.

The Japanese government tried to direct that flow of workers to the coal and metal mines that were indispensable for the war effort, but were only able to obtain a little more than 50% of the workers stipulated in the mobilization plan and only 1/4, or 150,000, of the Koreans who emigrated. The remaining 440,000 constituted a huge outflow of people to Japan that occurred outside the framework of the mobilization plan. Among these people were those summoned by family members who had already established themselves in Japan.

One reason why many Korean workers rejected being recruited is that they did not want to work in the underground shafts of coal and metal mines. The majority were farmers and were likely averse to working underground in coal and metal mines where discipline was strict.

Moreover, jobs for day laborers could be found throughout Japan at construction sites managed by Korean foremen.

The Later Phase of Mobilization: 40% Escaping Despite “Government-Mediated Recruitment”

With the start of the later period of mobilization in February 1942, the administrative body of the Government-General became directly involved in the process for mobilizing workers, which came to be conducted through what was known as “government-mediated recruitment.” This was likely a measure to change the situation whereby numerous workers were going to Japan outside the framework of wartime mobilization.

Coal mines, metal mines, construction companies, arms factories, and other businesses requested the Government-General to provide the number of workers they needed. In response, the Government-General assigned mobilization quotas to the provinces (corresponding to Japanese prefectures), which in turn assigned quotas to lower administrative levels such as districts and townships. Recruitment posters soliciting applications were placed at provincial and town offices, while government officials, the police, and persons of local influence were actively involved in mobilization activities.

Legally binding conscription began in Korea in September 1944. By the end of March 1945, there were almost no ferries traveling between Korea and Japan, effectively putting an end to the wartime mobilization of Koreans. As such, it can be said that labor conscription and its penal provisions were in effect for no more than seven months. Yet, this does not change the fact that the wartime mobilization was legal as Korea was under Japanese rule at the time.

The Korean population in Japan also grew during this period. There were 1,469,230 Koreans at the end of 1942, but this increased to about 2 million by August 1945. This was an increase of about 530,000.

The number of workers mobilized from 1942 to August 1945 was 520,548, or roughly 520,000. That is about the same size as the 530,000 increase in the Korean population in Japan. Looking at

the completion rate of the mobilization plan (defined as the percentage of the manpower targets that were met), it was 88% for this overall period. It was 93% for 1942, 81% for 1943, 97% for 1944, and 12% until August 1945. The completion rate for 1942-1944 was a comparatively high 95%.

We only have the 1942 figures for the natural increase in population, defined as population growth not caused by immigration. If we take the natural increase of 1942, which was 33,000, and use that as our standard for guessing the natural increase for the 2.5-year period from 1943 to August 1945, we get $33,000 \times 2.5 = 82,500$. This estimate suggests that the natural population increase from 1942 to August 1945 was 115,500, or roughly 120,000. Since the total increase in the Korean population in Japan and the number of people mobilized from 1942 to August 1945 were about the same, the natural increase in population of 120,000 should be equal to the difference between the number of immigrants and the number of people who returned to Korea. The immigrant workers and their families who had come to Japan outside the formal framework of the mobilization process and who ended up going back home—thus counterbalancing the natural increase in population of 120,000—probably returned to Korea to flee the war. In this period, the number of migrants who came as individuals (as opposed to coming as part of a group) fell drastically, and the number of people going back to Korea came to outnumber them as the war situation deteriorated.

With almost no Koreans heading to Japan as individuals outside the framework of wartime mobilization, it would seem that the regulated mobilization of workers of workers was realized during this 4-year period and the situation was favorable compared to the previous three years during which people were recruited.

The reality is that the wartime mobilization was not going according to plan in this period either. Most of those employed through “government-mediated recruitment” escaped during their contract period, instead becoming “free workers” hired as day laborers at construction sites. On top of this, the majority of those who fulfilled their 2-year contracts disappointed their employers by not renewing their contracts, opting to become “free workers” as well.

Statistics from the Ministry of Health and Welfare show that the percentage of mobilized workers escaping since 1939 had gone as high as 37%, equivalent to 222,225 workers, by the end of March 1945. Besides this, there were 52,108 workers who returned to Korea after fulfilling their contracts, 15,801 who were sent back for misconduct, and 8,904 others. Incidentally, there were 288,488 people working at the locations designated for those mobilized during wartime, making for a total of 587,526 people who had been initially subject to the provisions of wartime mobilization.

One popular explanation for the fact that about 40% of the workers escaped is that the workers were treated badly and made to work under harsh conditions as if in a labor camp. Yet most workers did not return to Korea but started working elsewhere in Japan. As discussed above, there were even those who pretended to be wartime-mobilized workers in order to travel to Japan and then immediately escaped to some other workplace that had been introduced to them beforehand by brokers.

As a way to prevent escapes, the workers who were mobilized were organized in teams of 50–200 people with appointed leaders. They then traveled to Japan in groups. These teams were also maintained after work started at the coal mines and other workplaces, and worker training was conducted in teams.

Yet one survey showed that an astonishing 60% of the workers had no intention of working at the coal mines for mobilized workers, but used the government-mediated recruitment process to travel to Japan and were thinking about escaping once in Japan. This survey was conducted by the Institute for Science of Labour at the Chikuhō coalfield in Fukuoka over a period of two weeks starting in early January 1942. Let us look at the entry on the workers' reasons for quitting their jobs. Note that the citation contains the words “migrating Koreans were granted travel permits

in October 1939.” This shows that “free recruitment” was understood as a measure that loosened restrictions and permitted Koreans to travel to Japan to work. This hints at just how many Koreans wanted to migrate for work:

Ever since migrating Koreans [literally “peninsular people”] were granted travel permits in October 1939, about 3,000 Koreans have migrated to coal mine E [1 of 6 coal mines in the survey. Operated by a local *zaibatsu*. The mine was already taking in Korean workers.] as of the end of 1941. Yet of these, only 1,222 remained as of the end of 1941, while 1,778, or 59.26%, have quit. Of the first group of 96 workers, only 36 remained to fulfill their 2-year contracts, while the other 60 quit. That is a resignation rate of 62.5%.

According to comments from labor officials at the relevant coal mines, the following are the likely causes.

(1) There are many taking advantage of the mobilization process (estimated to be about 60%) who come to the coal mines in order to enter Japan and then quit. That is, they apply for this “migration” process in order to find employment in Japan. As a result, there are many people without any intention of working in the coal mines who make use of “officially funded and officially sanctioned travel,” with expenses paid by the companies. This is identified as the primary cause of the high resignation rate. This was confirmed by all coal mine offices in the survey.

(2) Many are being enticed to work for others. There is intense scouting by individuals whose job is to recruit people. This has to do with the employers’ lack of preparation with regard to the workers, who end up being enticed to leave, as well as the old hiring methods of the coal mines. In particular, despite the fact that the demand for migration permits is great not only among coal mines and construction companies, but in all industries in Japan, the permits that are issued go primarily to prioritized businesses. As a result of this big gap between the permits issued and the demand among the many businesses that receive no permits, the businesses with such dramatic demand for labor saw the working force already in Japan as a potential “source of manpower.” Their efforts to recruit such workers is what explains the “enticement” of workers.

This survey is from when “government-mediated recruitment” had just started, but a report with similar findings was published in the specialized journal *Shakai seisaku jihō* (Social Reform) No. 280, in January 1944, during the third year when “government-mediated recruitment” was in effect. In the journal, Tetsushirō Onodera, likely an expert on Korean labor issues, gives seven factors prompting the escapes of workers: 1) enticement from the outside, 2) intention to escape from the outset, 3) aversion to working in a mine, 4) dissatisfaction with wages, 5) food shortages, 6) aversion to a disciplined lifestyle, and 7) excesses in the recruitment process. Of these, Onodera identified factor 1) (enticement from the outside) as “accounting for the majority of escapes.” He wrote that “The market price of one Korean worker on the labor market is generally known to be 30 to 50 yen.” This means that brokers looked for mobilized workers in exchange for 30 to 50 yen per person. That is how big the demand for workers was.

In September 1944, as the number of Koreans wanting to travel to Japan was shrinking due to a deteriorating war situation and the risks of air-raids, the conscription order, which had applied only to civilian staff of the military in 1941, was proclaimed for all of Korea. Koreans already at locations for mobilized workers in Japan were also subject to the order, as the authorities tried to prevent workers from escaping. Yet, as described in the previous section, the number of people at locations for mobilized workers at the end of the war was reported as only 322,890, or less than half of the number of mobilized workers, according to statistics from the Ministry of Health and Welfare, so we can doubt the effectiveness of the legally binding conscription order.

In other words, even in this period when mobilization was carried out using rather forcible means such as government-mediated recruitment and conscription, about 40% of the workers escaped after arrival, meaning that the mobilization plan, which aimed to secure a large number of migrant workers for coal mines and other locations, was effectively a failure.

The Failure of the Mobilization Plan

Until this point, we have looked at a variety of statistical data and have shed light on the reality of the mobilization plan for Koreans to Japan during the period from 1939 to August 1945. I would like to conclude by examining what the situation was like by August 1945.

For the duration of the plan, the Korean population in Japan grew by 1.2 million, from 800,000 to 2 million. Of these, 320,000 were wartime-mobilized workers at the end of the war. In addition, there were 110,000 Koreans mobilized as soldiers or other military staff. Besides them, there were 770,000 Koreans not part of the mobilization plan, that is, Koreans and their families who chose to live in Japan of their own volition. This group also included a large number of people who came to Japan through recruitment, “government-mediated recruitment,” or “labor conscription” and then either escaped before the end of their contracts or opted not to renew their contracts after their expiration, after which they chose not to return Korea but remained in Japan.

Conclusion

The following are my conclusions from the statistical analysis of the wartime mobilization of Korean workers.

The wartime mobilization of Korean workers that was implemented based on the National Mobilization Law from 1939 to 1945 was a policy that sought to control the avalanche of migrant workers who were seeking employment at construction sites by mobilizing them for the relatively unpopular coal and metal mines that were necessary for the war effort. This attempt at control did not go well.

The Plan for Sending Koreans to Korea, created based on the National Mobilization Law, was a policy that tried to efficiently redirect Korean manpower to industries necessary for the war effort while numerous people were moving from Korea to Japan.

1. In the early period of recruitment from 1939 to 1941, there were 140,000 mobilized migrants who came to Japan in groups and 440,000 migrants who came as individuals. That is, the number of Koreans who migrated outside the framework of the mobilization plan was about three times greater than the number of those who migrated after being mobilized, meaning that the plan failed. In the same period, 16,000 persons, corresponding to slightly more than 10% of the number of mobilized workers, were sent back to Korea from Japan as illegal immigrants.
2. In the later period of government-mediated recruitment and labor conscription from 1942 to 1945, the stream of migrants coming to Japan on an individual basis all but disappeared. However, 220,000, or 37%, of the 520,000 mobilized workers escaped from the locations for mobilized workers so that they could work elsewhere, outside the framework of the mobilization plan. Again, things were not going according to plan.
3. The wartime mobilization plan, which sought to efficiently redirect Korean manpower to industries necessary for the war effort, was unsuccessful due to the large number of Korean workers who wanted to work at locations unrelated to the plan..
4. There are two layers of untruth to descriptions of young men forcibly being taken from peaceful farm villages to work as slaves. Firstly, Korean workers wanted to work in Japan. They were not forcibly taken. Secondly, the majority found their own jobs and did not subject themselves to the control of the Japanese government as it sought to support the war effort.