

Japanese Military Rule in Northeastern Korea during the Russo-Japanese War

Keiki Kato

This paper examines Japanese military rule in Hamgyong Province (northeastern Korea) during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, with emphasis on responses from the Korean side. This research is important because many of the facts that relate to Japanese military rule in Hamgyong Province remain unclear and have been debated. From the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War, Hamgyong Province was occupied by the Russian army, but from August 1904 onwards, the Japanese military moved northwards into this region, expanding their area of occupation. From October 1904, this province was controlled by the Japanese military.

While developing their occupation of Hamgyong Province, the Japanese encountered no evidence that they could rely on the cooperation of local government officials. As a result, the primary aim of military rule became to intervene in the affairs of the regional government; even when viewed from the perspective of the 1904 Japan-Korea Treaty, forced by the former onto the latter, such interference ran counter to international law. The Japanese saw Hamgyong Province as a “battle area” and implemented military rule as defined by international law, thus justifying their interference. However, because military rule is only allowed in an enemy country, this action was clearly in violation of international law.

This research concludes that the Japanese military clearly violated the sovereignty of Korea during its military rule of Hamgyong Province. Specifically, the Japanese prevented appointments to regional governmental posts by the use of military force, took away the seals of officials, incarcerated local government officials, and freely designated people who were known cooperators to roles in government administration. Throughout this period, the Korean government harshly criticized this interference in regional government as a sovereignty violation. Many people in Hamgyong Province, including local government officials, strongly resisted the policies of military occupation policies.

Because Japan effectively treated Korea as an enemy country, the Russo-Japanese War was also a conflict between Japan and Korea.