

With Boots on the Ground: Japanese Direct Participation in the Korean War

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This article explores the participation of Japanese men and women in the Korean War for the historical branch of the global Korean Studies community.

Japan's surrender terms, as well as Article IX in its 1947 Constitution, instructed the defeated people to "renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation" and from maintaining military forces of any kind. Yet, with the 1950 start of the Korean War, Japanese facilities were revived to play, in the words of one United States diplomat, an "indispensable" role in the war. Additionally, a small but significant number of Japanese nationals crossed over to Korea to participate in the fighting. They killed, were injured and died, and were captured by the enemy in the process. Not only Japanese men, but also Japanese women were recruited in nursing roles during the war. All of this was conducted in secret with participating Japanese ordered to withhold any information on these events at the end of their exit interviews. However, the present century has seen much research on these events, some drawing from the 1000-plus pages of interview transcripts that are housed in the United States archives (NARA in College Park, Maryland) to reveal Japanese participation to an extent greater than some countries in the UN Command. It is estimated that more than seventy Japanese men crossed over to Korea from 1950; thousands more boarded ships to engage in minesweeping operations. Others were sent over to offer technological advice based on knowledge they had gained during Japan's thirty-five-year colonial period. This paper will focus on the Japanese men and women who directly participated in the Korean War with boots on the ground or in the seas surrounding the Peninsula at this time.