The Japanese Empire annexed Korea in 1910. To establish control over its colony, Japan “waged all-out war on Korean culture,” (Blakemore). By adopting a harsh policy of political and social restraint over Korea, the Japanese remained in control of the peninsula for thirty-five years.

"[The Japanese] believed that a common ancestry provided justification for colonial expansion into Korea" (Devine). Despite this shared bloodline, “Japanese people themselves, from the top levels of government down, considered Koreans inferior and gave them few political rights. Segregation was built into everyday life. [The] Japanese maintained separate communities in Korea, children were schooled in two separate and unequal systems, there was relatively limited intermarriage, and prejudice was ingrained” (Caprio).

"Koreans lived under the most ruthless colonial rule ever known in history."
—Yong-ha, professor at Hanyang University, in Seoul

"Energy for a Korean independence movement grew between 1910 and 1919, as the general populace became increasingly educated and willing to stand up against the Japanese,” (Corby)
The Birth of Resistance

“In Korea, many secret groups for the purpose of independence had been formed... Schools were built to promote national consciousness. Other people that were desperate for independence crossed over to Manchuria and the Americas to form groups and establish more schools. All those efforts flowed in the direction of bringing people together for the total impact of the independence movement,” (Arirang TV)

"The desire for national independence became even stronger when various European countries, such as Poland and Romania, regained their freedom after World War I," (Devine)

In January 1919, President Woodrow Wilson gave his Fourteen Points statement with the intention of encouraging peace negotiations to formally end World War I. Korean students used Wilson’s speech to outline their demands of independence, which were rejected publicly in Seoul.

"On March 1, 1919, after 9 years of Japanese occupation, 33 primary cultural and religious leaders of the social movement (main political leaders were jailed or in exile) unincorporated and drew up a proclamation of independence. This sparked a nationwide protest movement called the March 1st Movement or the Korean Independence Movement, which involved widespread demonstrations to resist colonial rule." (De-Koreanization Project of C)

"No printing shop dared to print the declaration of independence or constitution. So the revolutionaries carved printing forms from blocks of wood and made thousands of copies, which were sent all over the country." (Chattanooga News, 1919)

"We hereby declare that Korea is an independent state and the Koreans are a self-governing people. We solemnly proclaim our independence to all the nations, in accordance with the equality of all men; we also proclaim it to all the coming generations to preserve the fundamental right of self-determination. Each one of twenty million people have sharpened swords in their hearts, the universal values and conscience serve us as the area of justice, and moral laws become part of our ammunition. If we are determined, what enemies can stand between us and our independence?" (Declaration of Korean Independence)
Under Japanese occupation since 1910, Korea of the twentieth century harbored inconceivable tragedies. The eradication of Korean culture prompted thousands to protest Japanese brutality. The March First Movement of 1919 made a martyr of the young activist Yu Gwan Sun, whose efforts would evoke the triumph of Korean independence.

”Korea’s Joan of Arc”
(S. Kim)

Sixteen-year-old Yu Gwan Sun, “a student at Ewha Haktang in Seoul,” (Kang), joined a student protest during the revolts of Korea’s proclamation of independence on March 1st, 1919. She was arrested, but her professors at Ewha negotiated her release.

“March First Movement” became the official title for the Korean Independence Movement as word spread about the declaration and events of March 1st. In the weeks that followed, Yu smuggled copies of the Korean Declaration of Independence to twenty-four cities and towns around Korea. On the night of March 31st, “Yu climbed to the top of Mount Maembong, where she lit a beacon fire, signaling to the villages,” (Yu Gwan-Sun – The Unsung Heroes Who Fought for Independence). The next day, Nearly three thousand people would join her in protest at Aunae Marketplace, where the Japanese military police stepped in by open firing, killing 19 people, including Yu’s parents,” (Hy-Young).
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"In retaliation for her [Yu's] rebellious actions, the Japanese burned her family's home to the ground. Her uncle, Yu Jongmu, went to the police headquarters to complain, carrying the body of his dead brother in protest. He served three years in prison for his actions." (Hyung, H.)

It would take weeks for the Japanese to forcefully end the protests. Two million Koreans participated in over fifteen hundred rallies, and by their resolutions, seven thousand Koreans had been killed with forty-six thousand arrested; including Yu Gwan-Sun (O. Euny).
A Tragedy of Peaceful Resistance

"Their cells were...specifically designed for torture as they were approximately 3.3 square meters, making standing upright impossible." (Yu Gwan-Sun - The Unsung Heroes Who Fought for Independence).

Even if my fingernails are torn out, my nose and ears are ripped apart, and my legs and arms are crushed, this physical pain does not compare to the pain of losing my nation. My only remorse is not being able to do more than dedicating my life to my country."

Yu Gwan Sun passed away in prison on September 28, 1920, when she was seventeen years old. After months of torture and beatings, Yu became a martyr for Korean independence, earning herself the title “Korea’s Joan of Arc.” (S.Kim). A fellow prisoner recounted her last words: “Japan will fall.”

The Triumph of Korean Independence

Twenty-six years after the March First Movement, Korea was freed from Japan's rule.
The Triumph of Korean Independence

Twenty-six years after the March First Movement, Korea was freed of Japan's rule.

Though the March First Movement did not immediately achieve Korean independence, it was this spark of resistance that paved the way for Korean triumph. "The movement... crystalized a sense of national unity and was a catalyst for the resistance," (Kang, Inyoung).

"March First was the first mass protest of modern Korean nationalism, involving Koreans of every province, religion, class, and gender, and it marked a watershed in the evolution of Korean national identity and, more broadly, of modern Korean history." (Skuba)

"Yu's efforts for independence and justice would presage the later nonviolent work of Mohandas K. Gandhi and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Junior... her name remains a source of strength and pride to Koreans even today, and has taken a place among the most beloved Korean patriots in Korean history." (Oivies)

"The movement tapped into the deep spiritual consciousness of the Korean people and unified ordinary citizens through a common vision of dedicating to build a model nation of peace and harmony." (The Birth of the Korean Independence Movement)
A Tragedy of Peaceful Resistance

“Their cells were specifically designed for torture as they were approximately 3.3 square meters, making standing upright impossible” (Yu Gwan Sun – The Unsung Heroes Who Fought for Independence).

From underground confinement, Yu secretly documented her thoughts:

“Even if my fingernails are torn out, my nose and ears are ripped apart, and my legs and arms are crushed, this physical pain does not compare to the pain of losing my nation. My only remorse is not being able to do more than dedicate my life to my country.”

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Yu’s efforts for independence and her struggle were not in vain. She was part of a wave of people fighting against Japanese colonialism. Her legacy continues to inspire the fight for freedom and the pursuit of justice for all nations.