*The following excerpt is taken from a March 2019 Carnegie Council podcast entitled “*[*The Crack-Up: 1919 & the Birth of Modern Korea, with Kyung Moon Hwang*](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20190314-crack-up-1919-birth-modern-korea-kyung-moon-hwang)*.” The podcast is based off* The New York Times *opinion piece “*[*The Birth of Korean Nationhood*](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/01/opinion/the-birth-of-korean-nationhood.html)*” written by historian* [*Kyung Moon Hwang*](https://dornsife.usc.edu/cf/faculty-and-staff/faculty.cfm?pid=1003371)*. This transcript has been edited for classroom use.*

By the time 1919 came, Korea had been a Japanese colony for nine years. The circumstances of the end of World War I led to Koreans in Northeast Asia—so both in and outside of Korea [China, Japan]—to start gathering and organizing themselves to take advantage of the situation [and] to try to push for some kind of action…

There was a confluence of forces—intellectual, political, and otherwise—at the end of February and early March, and it was decided that on March 1 [that] the leaders of this organized effort in Korea who had signed a declaration of independence would read [it] aloud on [that date] in a park in central Seoul. They were quickly arrested, which they knew in advance would happen, and then some of the leaders fanned out to lead [more] demonstrations. This pattern of reading aloud the declaration and then going out to march peacefully—at least [peacefully] initially—was repeated throughout the Peninsula thereafter for several weeks.

**How did the Korean March 1st Movement begin?**

[T]he leadership was very much aware of the ethos of self-determination on the part of smaller nations, and they were aware of the strategy behind using the Paris Peace Conference as a platform to voice their aspirations on a global stage. I can't say that the average Korean was aware of this as a percolating idea around the world, but certainly the intellectuals, the social leaders, and educational leaders were aware of this. I think it proved to be a powerful, unifying force in 1919 in Korea…

Korea, unlike many other colonized peoples actually was an independent state for over a millennium before the Japanese conquest of the early 20th century. [This] certainly was a major point of grievance, and this was an opportunity that the leadership used to express that grievance.

**How did the concept of self-determination and the Paris Peace Conference influence the March 1st Movement?**

**Was the March 1st movement a success?**

If you believe that success more or less hinged upon gaining immediate independence, then of course the March 1 demonstrations and the efforts thereafter did not succeed. But if you look at this from the perspective not necessarily of national independence but rather of the forwarding of development of Korean society in different ways, then it certainly did bring about a loosening of the major restrictions of Japanese colonial rule that had been in place for the first decade.

Historians look at [the results of the March 1 movement] in a different way from the [Korean] public… [T]he ensuing one-and-a-half decades after March 1 really was a period of liberalization, and it did result in tremendous developments in terms of modern Korean culture, to the extent that one can suggest that *modern* Korean culture [and modern Korean nationhood] was born at this time in so many ways. [T]he period of the 1920s to the early 1930s was a direct outcome from the March 1 demonstrations [and was] a considerable period of liberalization and cultural activity as well as associational and social activity. [[1]](#footnote-1)

**Would you consider the March 1st Movement to be a success? Explain.**

1. Koreans during this time were granted “cultural rule,” which gave them a greater ability to pursue economic, religious, and intellectual endeavors but they were still under the political control of colonial Japan. These freedoms ended with the [Pacific War](https://www.nationalgeographic.org/interactive/world-war-ii-pacific/) (1937-1945). For more information please see “[The Birth of Korean Nationhood](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/01/opinion/the-birth-of-korean-nationhood.html)” by Kyung Moon Hwang. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)