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The 'crimes' of BTS and the hidden issues behind reparations

By Emanuel Pastreich



The November tour of Japan planned for rising Korean boy band BTS displayed the potential to become a massive commercial and economic success that would go beyond even Psy's "Gangnam Style" in Japan, and around the world.

The popularity of BTS with young Japanese also had the potential to move relations between the two countries beyond the obsession with history issues and to create a new cultural circulation between ordinary citizens.

After all, BTS had been featured on the cover of Time Magazine's international edition on October 11 with the provocative headline "How BTS Is Taking Over the World." That widely read article included a moving video relating how BTS emphasized ethical issues, as seen in their talk at the United Nations in September.

Band member Kim Nam-joon talked at the U.N. about the alienation felt by young people, suggesting they could move forward if they loved themselves and embraced a positive attitude toward the world. This reference to the song and video by BTS "Love Yourself" suggested a way out of the passivity and alienation that overshadows youth.

The Time Magazine article also included a comparison with The Beatles, noting BTS was the first Korean band to sell out a whole stadium in the United States and that they did not need to redo all their songs in English.

BTS had managed to weave together a deep sympathy for the plight of young people in an increasingly ruthless and uncaring economic system together with the dance moves and tear-jerking lyrics that young people can relate to. Others had made such arguments to youth. But their messages were lost on youth who are accustomed to responding to YouTube performances, not lectures and sermons.

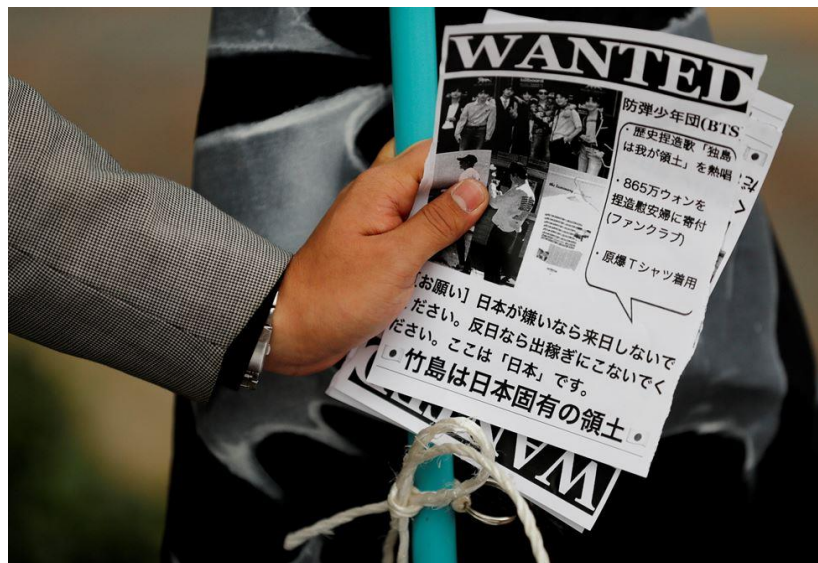
Suddenly, on November 8, TV Asahi announced that the live performance of BTS on its popular

program “Music Station” the following day had been cancelled. The Japanese media was filled with reports of other cancelations and for a few days it appeared as if Japan had been swept by an anti-Korean wave that endangered the entire tour.

The newspapers in Japan and Korea were full of superficial reports that described cultural and diplomatic “spats” between the peoples of the two countries. The actions of TV Asahi, a for-profit media corporation that obviously took a big financial risk by canceling the broadcast the day before, suggest that something bigger was going on.

Before looking at the mainstream explanation for the cancelations, let us consider the critical events that preceded TV Asahi's decision and their implications.

First and foremost, TV Asahi's decision suddenly to cancel the performance was a violation of contract law. A formal contract for the performance had been signed. But TV Asahi felt free to renege on it, even though BTS honored its side. The only excuse given was that one member of the band had worn a T-shirt a year ago that was judged by TV Asahi to be offensive.



A man holds leaflets denouncing South Korean boy band BTS outside Tokyo Dome, where the band's concert was held, on Nov. 13. Reuters

Such actions by a corporation are egregious, but they have much in common with the blatant violations of the rule of law we are witnessing in Trumpian America.

The position of TV Asahi that it could decide on its own that BTS's actions were offensive and that it could violate a legal contract with impunity is best understood in the context of the new interpretation of economic sanctions advanced by the Trump administration as a means to advance the interests of corporations through economic warfare.

The campaigns against Iran, Russia, Turkey and North Korea under Trump have made such economic sanctions into a weapon for sale to multinational corporations to pursue their own interests. This use of economic sanctions makes a complete mockery of not only international law and contract law, but also of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and trade agreements.

In the case of North Korea and Iran, “economic sanctions” have nothing to do with stopping the spread of nuclear weapons through international agreements (the Trump administration shows deep contempt for non-proliferation treaties) or about ending human rights violations (something that the Trump administration encourages at home and abroad). Rather, economic sanctions serve two critical purposes. They increase pressure on the country targeted so that in negotiations that country will be forced to accept a raw deal to avoid the pain created by economic sanctions. Economic sanctions also give certain corporations with close ties to the government to have the right to engage in the secret negotiations about economic relations with the country that is subject to sanctions, while NGOs, experts and smaller businesses are completely blocked out.

The Abe administration finds the abandonment of international law, and of diplomacy, by the Trump administration intriguing. Economic sanctions could be a new tool for Japan to use to get what it wants without going through pesky processes like the WTO, which require transparency and accountability.

The cancellation of the BTS appearance can be interpreted as a trial balloon for a new kind of mini-economic sanctions that could be applied even against economic rivals like South Korea that are not branded as threats by the United States. The Abe administration was trying out this suspension of due process to see if it could create an environment in which powerful political figures dictate economic or trade relations without any means of appeal. Perhaps this action was a trial balloon for a new approach to economics better suited to the super-rich who are frustrated by the regulations made by bureaucrats and other little people.

So what was it that prompted the Abe administration to pursue this strategy against South Korea, and specifically BTS?

The answer is not hard to find.

The South Korean Supreme Court issued a ruling on Oct. 30 ordering Nippon Steel and Sumitomo Metal Corporation to pay 100 million won (\$88,000) to four Koreans who were forcibly made to work under hazardous conditions in its factories during the Second World War. Several other similar cases are pending that could result in even larger demands for reparations. If the flood gates are opened, thousands of Koreans may seek billions of dollars in compensation from Japanese corporations over the months and years ahead.

This ruling is the first concrete award of damages since the Supreme Court recognized in 2012 the rights of victims to file for compensation against Japanese companies during wartime.

The granting of such compensation may not seem that remarkable. After all, the crimes of the Japanese government during the Pacific War have been extensively documented. But this ruling represents a historic shift in how the suffering of Koreans before 1945 is treated and a breakdown of the consensus that has been in place for the past 60 years that limited how the issue could be discussed and addressed.

The Japanese government claims that all reparations from Japan to South Korea have been paid in full, in accord with the 1965 normalization treaty (Treaty on Basic Relations). That treaty, signed by Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato and South Korean President Park Chong-hee, stipulated that \$300 million in economic aid, \$500 million in favorable loans and some

technology transfer from Japan would settle all claims of Koreans against the Japanese government, against Japanese corporations and against Japanese individuals, forever.

The recent ruling is a major risk to the conservatives around Abe, particularly those who have large holdings of stock in conglomerates. They worry that the future debate on compensation will cease to be presented as the fuzzy resentment of the Japanese people by the Koreans.

Such vague ideas of Korean emotions about Japan have aided corporations by keeping public attention focused on intangible bad feelings between the peoples that can never be resolved.

But this ruling is not vague at all, and it is not anti-Japanese. It focuses on the specific actions of two corporations, corporations that have deep pockets and which were liable by international standards for damages. The discussion is no longer about Korean pride now, but rather about corporate liability.

The risks of this ruling for wealthy stockholders in Japan are immense. It is not an issue that matters so much for ordinary Japanese. But powerful forces want the man in the street in Japan to think that somehow the ruling is an affront to all Japanese.

Aso Taro, finance minister in the Abe cabinet and arch-conservative, is outspoken on the issue of reparations. Aso comes from a family that made a fortune from mining in Manchuria that was undertaken by Koreans (and other peoples) — many forced laborers — none of them provided with appropriate safety equipment in the dangerous mines. Aso Taro's father, Aso Takakichi, was the owner of the Aso Cement Company that profited from the exploitation of forced labor and low-wage labor.

Aso and his friends have been counting on the basic treaty of 1965 to block all demands for compensation. The Japanese government, and Japanese corporations that influence it, have consistently responded to demands for compensation by stating that all compensation issues for the government and for corporations alike were settled by the treaty.

The treaty also dictates that no compensation for damages from before the 1911 annexation will be allowed either, blocking the way for claims concerning the manner by which Japanese corporations illegally seized land and resources in Korea at the end of the Joseon Dynasty and illegally (by Joseon Dynasty law) set up banks and railroads, and bribed Korean government officials.

Of course all that was a very long time ago. But let us not kid ourselves here. There are plenty of precedents for successful lawsuits for compensation for wrongs from 100 years ago. What has altered is the consensus held over the past 60 years that these topics are off limits for demands. I personally think that the irrational assumption that the 1965 treaty ended all possibilities for claims against Japanese companies for damages during the Second World War derives from a series of post-war U.S.-Japan-Korea agreements that remain classified to this date.

But there is more to the story. Although the media presents the court ruling as one favorable to Koreans and unfavorable to Japanese, such an interpretation is dishonest. First and foremost, Koreans, that is to say the people who inhabited the region previously controlled by the Joseon Dynasty, were designated as citizens of the Japanese empire by the Japanese government. They were not legally Koreans during the period in question. Although the status of their citizenship

was not the same as citizens of Japan in terms of their ability to advance in government and to own property and businesses (with some important exceptions), they were considered to be Japanese until the Japanese government unilaterally declared them to be Koreans in 1945 without any legal process.

In a sense, when the Japanese government stripped Koreans of their citizenship and refused to give them any pensions or medical or legal aid, it was acting on behalf of Japanese corporations that wanted to cut their liabilities for their actions.

But if the demands for compensation increase, the process will quickly become an issue within Japan itself. After all, there are many Koreans living in Japan who were also stripped of their citizenship in the Japanese Empire in 1945 and who have not had the right to demand compensation.

For that matter, the Japanese government has blocked efforts of Japanese to seek compensation for damages from Japanese corporations for their actions during the Pacific War. If Koreans start getting compensation, there is a risk that Japanese also will start to make such demands. The expert on colonial-era forced labor **William Underwood** told me that it has been impossible so far for Japanese nationals to sue Japanese companies for conscription either because all Japanese were subject to national conscription from 1939. All that could change and that the myth that reparations are an emotional dispute between the Korean and Japanese peoples will crumble.

But why was the ruling on compensation made at this particular moment? After all, the forced labor issue has not drawn much attention in the Korean mainstream media. The overwhelming focus in the Korean media has been on a handful of surviving “comfort women,” women forced to perform sexual services for the Japanese military during the Second World War.

Perhaps there is something else going on behind the scenes concerning reparations.

We know from various leaks in the media that the Japanese government and Japanese corporations are engaged in negotiations with North Korea behind the scenes concerning the normalization of relations and future economic relations. Most likely those negotiations concern future contracts for the building of infrastructure, the rights to mine and exploit minerals in North Korea and permission for Japanese corporations to build and run factories in North Korea. All of these fields of activity are potentially extremely profitable for Japanese corporations, if destructive for North Koreans.

One topic that certainly came up in those secret negotiations is reparations for the war-time sufferings of Koreans who live in North Korea. The Japanese government never recognized the government of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea after the war, and it has never paid any reparations similar to the deal that the Republic of Korea received in 1965. North Korean negotiators know history well and they understand how Japanese politics works. They are probably demanding top dollar for compensation for sufferings and making it the condition for access to the North Korean economy.

The Abe administration most likely wants to make an agreement with North Korea in secret that is similar to the 1965 treaty and that offers a lump sum to be paid to Kim Jong-un and others, along with some technology transfer and some investment opportunities. Considering that North Korea has consistently demanded reparations for damages caused by colonialism, whereas South

Korea accepted a less confrontational “economic cooperation” paradigm, North Korea may reach a far more comprehensive agreement for reparations with Japan that South Korea made in 1965 — even if the details are kept secret.

If North Korea gets a better deal than South Korea on reparations, the entire can of worms that Japanese conservatives thought they had sealed away forever in 1965 could be opened up again. The negotiations about reparations taking place in Pyongyang may have forced Seoul to open the way for individual claims against Japanese corporations, and that move could lead to numerous demands from North Korea, South Korea, China, and even within Japan itself.

T-shirts and hats with skulls

Now let us look at the sudden cancellation of BTS's performance on TV Asahi and how that tale was related in the media in South Korea and in Japan.

The cancellation was presented as an expression of Japanese anger against the cultural insensitivity of Koreans for Japanese suffering in the Second World War.

On October 26, the newspaper Tokyo Sports condemned BTS member Jimin for an “anti-Japanese act” because he was filmed in a YouTube documentary a year ago wearing a T-shirt on Korean Independence Day that featured a photograph of a mushroom cloud in the upper right-hand corner. This shirt was assumed to be anti-Japanese and this offensive behavior by a Korean boy band was quickly picked up by Zaitokukai, an anti-Korean group that then wrote multiple posts about BTS and staged an anti-Korean demonstration dedicated to this T-shirt. A series of other popular entertainment figures subsequently made comments about the T-shirt in question.



It was then that Asahi suddenly cancelled BTS's performance on its show “Music Station.” NHK and Fuji TV also stated that they would cancel broadcasts of BTS.

The T-shirt, worn on liberation day, features the words “Patriotism, our history, liberation,

Korea” repeatedly and shows the atomic bomb to the right. Personally, I think it is inappropriate to link the image of the atomic bomb dropped by the United States on Japan with the fight for liberation in Korea, but among T-shirts related to Korean liberation that I have seen, this one is relatively tame. I doubt anyone would have found the shirt offensive unless they were told to see it as such.

Perhaps Jimin did not think all that seriously about what the mushroom cloud on the T-shirt signified. But the criticisms in the Japanese media said nothing about the need to increase the understanding of history of young people — a problem that is at least as serious in Japan as it is in Korea.

Perhaps the T-shirt suggests that the actions of Japan in the Second World War were sufficiently evil as to warrant the use of atomic weapons. Such an opinion is deeply problematic in my opinion, but it is widespread in the older generation in South Korea and the United States. But it is far from clear that the T-shirt had that significance for Jimin. If we want to know what young Koreans think the significance of the use of nuclear weapons by the U.S. was, we should ask them directly. TV Asahi never did so.

Other interpretations of the T-shirt are quite possible. Perhaps it was intended to be ambiguous. The T-shirt can be interpreted as a condemnation of the Pacific War as a whole, or even as a tribute to the large number of Koreans who were also killed by the atomic bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima — many of whom were there because they were brought as forced labor.

The other offense of BTS that was raised in the Japanese and international press was the photograph of a one of its members posing with a military hat that features the skull insignia of the SS in one of a series of photographs.

This photograph was also condemned in the media almost immediately after the “controversy” about the atomic bomb. Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean and director of global social action at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles condemned BTS for “mocking the past” and went on to say that: “It goes without saying that this group, which was invited to speak at the U.N., owes the people of Japan and the victims of Nazism an apology.” Rabbi Cooper had nothing to say about the praise of finance minister Aso Taro for Hitler, or the popularity of Nazi images in Japanese popular culture, or the broad reception of anti-Semitic writings in Japan that go far beyond anything to be found in South Korea.

There is absolutely no evidence that BTS has an anti-Semitic agenda. But the members were clearly, and offensively, ignorant of the Holocaust and insensitive to the feelings of those who suffered.

Their actions were wrong and they apologized. But such use of images of Nazi origin in Japan, or elsewhere, are extremely common. And many so-called conservatives in the United States and Europe have displayed a deep fascination with the Nazi movement.

I played cowboys and Indians as a little boy in the Mid West. One team played the Caucasian “cowboys” who chased the native American “Indians.” I did not know that I was indulging in a celebration of the genocide of the native Americans in the 19th century — although that interpretation is not inaccurate.

The show must go on

BTS made an extensive apology for the various offenses and the tour went forward as planned. Although threats of violence and online criticisms continued in Japan, including a bomb threat in Nagoya, the BTS concert at Tokyo Dome brought in over 50,000 fans, and an anti-Korean demonstration of two people.

BTS is not made up of professors of history. I wish that there was not such a strong anti-intellectual trend in contemporary society, but we cannot blame that on BTS. Nevertheless, the band's songs suggest a sophisticated sensitivity to the condition of youth that might still help Koreans and Japanese to love themselves, and each other.