

# Hashima Island: A Short History

Handout A — Student reading

*Simulating Silence — Secondary Teacher Resources*

## KEY TERMS

**Company town:** A place where one company owns all the buildings, shops, and services. Workers depend on the company for everything — not just their jobs, but their homes, food, and schools.

**Forced labour:** When people are made to work against their will, often under threat of punishment. During World War II, Japan forced Korean and Chinese workers to work in mines and factories.

**World Heritage Site:** A place that UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) says is so important that it belongs to all of humanity and must be protected.

## A Tiny Island with a Big Purpose

Hashima is a small island off the coast of Nagasaki in southern Japan. It is also called Gunkanjima, which means “Battleship Island,” because from the sea it looks like a warship. The island is tiny — about the size of two football pitches. But for almost a century, it was one of the most crowded places on Earth. Over 5,000 people lived there at its peak. The island was built for one purpose: to mine coal from under the seabed. The company that ran it, Mitsubishi, controlled everything on the island.

## The Mine and the Company Town (1890-1939)

Mitsubishi bought the island in 1890. They expanded it by dumping rock and concrete into the sea to make it bigger. They built seawalls to protect it from typhoons. They sank mine shafts hundreds of metres below the seabed. They built Japan’s first concrete high-rise apartment block on the island in 1916 — to fit as many workers as possible into a tiny space. The company owned every building: the apartments, the school, the hospital, the shops, even the cinema. Workers and their families depended on Mitsubishi for everything. This kind of place is called a company town.

## The War Years (1939-1945)

During World War II, coal became essential for Japan’s war effort. The Japanese government passed laws that allowed it to send workers to mines whether they wanted to go or not. Between 1939 and 1945, Korean and Chinese workers were brought to Hashima under these laws. They were forced labourers — people made to work against their will. Conditions were harsh. The mine shafts were hot, narrow, and dangerous. Some workers died. After the war ended in 1945, the surviving Korean and Chinese workers left the island. How many worked there, and exactly what happened to them, is still debated today.

## After the War (1945-1974)

After 1945, Hashima continued as a working mine under different conditions. The population grew. By 1959, over 5,200 people lived on the island — making it the most densely populated place on the planet. Residents had schools, a hospital, shops, a swimming pool, and rooftop gardens built on top of the apartment blocks. Photographs from this period show children playing and families going about daily life. These images later became the main way people remembered the island.

## Abandoned (1974-2009)

In the 1960s, Japan started switching from coal to oil. The mine became unprofitable. In January 1974, Mitsubishi closed it. By April, every resident had left. The island was sealed off. For the next 35 years,

nobody lived there. Typhoons, salt water, and time slowly destroyed the buildings. Photographers who visited called it a “ghost island.”

### **World Heritage Site (2015-today)**

In 2009, tourists were allowed to visit a small part of the island. In 2015, UNESCO made Hashima a World Heritage Site — but this caused a major argument. Japan said the island was important because it showed how Japan became an industrial power. South Korea and China said Japan was ignoring the history of forced labour. Japan promised to tell the “full history” of the site. By 2021, UNESCO said Japan had not kept that promise. The argument continues today.

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