

A Policy of Amateurism: The Rice Policy of the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea, 1945-1948

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Abstract

This study intends to analyze the evolution of USAMGIK's rice policy. It also examines the influence of rice on Korean politics and reviews the U.S. military occupation policy in Korea. This paper stresses that USAMGIK's rice policy underwent trials and errors and ended in failure.

Because former Japanese food controls had broken down, the American military government inaugurated a new rice policy, establishing a free market in rice in October 1945. Unfortunately, the attempted establishment of the free market led to complete disaster. The shortage of rice was evident throughout the country. The American military government had not only rescinded the free market, but had ordered rice rationing. The disastrous shortage of rice in South Korea caused Soviet-U.S. relations on the Korean peninsula to deteriorate. The worsening food situation forced the American military government to revive the old Japanese rice collection system in January 1946. Because of its overwhelming importance in Korean life and the bad practices involved in its collection, rice exerted a great influence on South Korean domestic politics. In sum, one of the greatest failures of U.S. military occupation policy in Korea had to do with rice policy.

Keywords: U.S. Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), John R. Hodge, Korean People's Republic, people's committees, rice collection, rice rationing, Soviet-U.S. Joint Commission, the South Korean Interim Legislative Assembly (SKILA)

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Traditionally, rice was not just food; it meant almost everything in Korea. As the main crop and chief source of income, it was an all-important factor in the Korean economy. For a long time, it had even functioned as currency. To the general Korean population, rice was the root of all culture and the "soul" of life. Historically, "rice was king." Because of its importance, all Korean rulers had devoted themselves heavily to the issue of rice throughout Korean history. In particular, during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), the king had a small portion of farmland called *jeokjeon*, or "registered land," on the palace grounds, where, in order to encourage agriculture, he himself engaged in rice farming.

Rice was also a fundamental factor in the successes and failures of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) between the years of 1945-1948. The end of the Pacific War came sooner than expected, on August 15, 1945, without the anticipated U.S. invasion of the Japanese home islands. The United States hastily proposed a temporary military occupation of Korea, dividing it into zones at the 38th parallel. The Soviets, who had advanced into the Korean peninsula upon their declaration of war against Japan on August 8, agreed to the arrangement. Americans had little preparation for the task of governing Korea. None of those involved in the decision to partition the Korean peninsula at the 38th parallel had expertise in Korea. Some two thousand civil affairs officers had been trained for military government duty in Japan, and elaborate plans had been drawn up for that country, but no one had been trained and no plans made for Korea.¹ Later, some of these civil affairs offi-

1. Some Korean and American studies stress that, at the time, the United States was well prepared for occupying and administering Korea. For example, a Korean study asserts that before August 1945, the United States was well-informed about Korea, made preparations for Japan's premature surrender, and fully considered the possible deterioration of Soviet-U.S. relations in formulating its Korea policy. In particular, it emphasizes that in 1945, the American occupation forces and their civil affairs teams had considerable knowledge of Korea, since they had a massive, detailed study entitled "Joint Army-Navy Intelligence Study of Korea" (JANIS-75). Lee (1990, 171-189). An American study maintains that, at the time, the United States had definite goals and policies regarding Korea. Americans wanted to block

cers were transferred from Japan to Korea, without even rudimentary knowledge of the Korean language.

Ignorant of conditions in Korea and devoid of any definite plan of action, the American military authorities in Korea at first directed the Japanese governor-general to continue governing the country until other arrangements could be made. The Korean outcry, however, forced the hasty abandonment of this tactic. To the Americans, it seemed that the only remaining option was direct U.S. military government of the zone south of the 38th parallel. On September 12, 1945, Major General Archibald V. Arnold was sworn in as Governor-General. Two days later, all Japanese officials were removed from office, and the title of the administration was changed from Government-General to "Military Government," because the former denoted a "colonial status." The military government was not formally organized until January 4, 1946. Early civil affairs teams were under the command of tactical forces until that time, though they fell under the control of Military Governor Arnold after September 12.²

Lack of preparation or definite plans of action caused the USAMGIK to make a lot of mistakes in the administration of military government in Korea. The most serious error had to do with its rice policy.

A few prior studies have dealt with USAMGIK's rice policy. Among them, Korean studies scholars explain the rice policy in terms of the establishment of an anti-communist state in South Korea. They assert that the American military government forcibly collected rice from farmers and supplied it to urban dwellers, laborers in particular, who were more radical and leftist than farmers. America's rice policy

the southward flow of Soviet power in Korea, and this dictated the logic of the occupation in the first place. It also stresses that the Americans possessed JANIS-75, an accurate source on Korea. Cumings (1981). Because of leftist bias, these revisionist views lack persuasion and thus constitute a minority opinion. Subsequent history does not substantiate America's preparedness for its military occupation policy. For criticisms of revisionist interpretations on America's postwar Korean policy, see Lew (1998).

2. Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (1946, 281).

in South Korea was calculated to stem the tide of a Korean revolution. In light of that practicality, they argue, the American military government's rice policy was successful.³ U.S. studies of America's rice policy in South Korea see it as a bungled mess caused by ignorance and naivete.⁴

This study is an analysis of the evolution of USAMGIK's rice policy. It also examines the influence of rice on Korean domestic politics and reviews the U.S. military occupation policy in Korea, including the occupation government's rice policy. This paper stresses that the American military government's rice policy underwent difficulties and errors that ended in failure. Based on a chronic ignorance of Korean affairs, the rice policy displayed the American military government's incompetence in dealing with Korean affairs, which severely damaged the USAMGIK's credibility, further aggravating the lives of the Korean masses who were struggling to get by, and contributed to the deterioration of U.S.-Soviet relations on the Korean peninsula.

Korea as a Supplier of Food Grain for Japan

Before Japan's defeat in the Pacific War in August 1945, Korea had a rice-based colonial economy that had been tightly controlled in the interest of creating a rice surplus to feed Japan. In particular, the southern part of the peninsula was predominantly agricultural and supplied a greater portion of the food for all of Korea. It was considered the "rice bowl" of the country. Since rice came mainly from South Korea, the southern part of the Korean peninsula maintained a much higher population density.

The Japanese found in Korea a country that could produce enough food for all purposes during their colonial rule. In particular, Japan's war effort against China and its expansion into the Pacific

3. Choe (1996, 103-125; 1994, 237-256); Bak (2002, 219-248); Cha (1997).

4. Cumings (1981); Lauterbach (1947); Robinson (1947).

rapidly increased the need for military provisions, especially rice. In order to exploit Korean farm products for the war effort, the Japanese in the 1940s employed a method called *gongchul*, or allocated offerings from the harvest. To stave off mass starvation in Korea, the Japanese, who took harvested rice from Korea between 1940 and 1945, imported grain substitutes from Manchuria.

The Japanese placed rigid controls on the people of Korea to build up a food surplus. In 1933, a rice control ordinance was enacted, prohibiting a free market. Exportation from ports was controlled and regulations were issued stipulating the maximum and minimum price for rice. After Pearl Harbor, stronger and more rigid controls were established, as evidenced by Chosen Food Control Ordinance no. 44, which went into effect on August 9, 1943. The Chosen Food Company, as the purchasing, storage, and distribution agency of the Japanese Government-General, handled the entire rice crop in Korea. Private enterprise was eliminated from the food control system. All grains, and rice in particular, were monopolized by the Japanese.⁵

Failure of the Free Market Policy

When the Americans arrived in Korea in September 1945, the situation was a very difficult one for the occupation authorities to handle, and it became immediately apparent that the decision for direct administration was a mistake. An atmosphere of anarchy developed in South Korea after American troops arrived in the southern part of the Korean peninsula. In particular, the Americans found that Japanese control over rice had been loosened or altogether abolished. Instead, the Korean People's Republic (KPR) and people's committees managed food stocks, and according to American accounts, "after the Koreans drove the Japanese police out, [the leaders of the KPR and people's committees] took over the rice collection machin-

5. "Narrative History of the National Food Administration," October 1948, in United States Army Forces in Korea, Record Group 332, XXIV Corps Historical File.

ery and were operating it successfully when the Americans arrived."⁶

At the Pacific War's end, the Japanese felt obliged to turn to a Korean leader to maintain order, pending arrival of the Allied forces. Spurned by Song Jin-u, a conservative, who feared being typed as a collaborator, the Japanese authorities finally called on the left-leaning nationalist leader, Yeo Un-hyeong. He was a well-known moderate leftist nationalist who was held in high esteem among Koreans, owing to his long record of opposition to Japanese rule. Yeo organized the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence (CPKI) on August 16. With its encouragement, local notables organized people's committees throughout the country, with associated volunteer police forces, and in many places displaced the Japanese from governmental functions, including rice collection.

When news arrived that the United States was planning to occupy southern Korea, Yeo's CPKI called a national convention in Seoul on September 6 to give his regime the stamp of legitimacy. Yeo and his followers wanted to quicken the process of establishing a new government before the Americans arrived. Yeo proclaimed the establishment of the Korean People's Republic, with a cabinet that included distinguished nationalists of all political persuasions, right and left. But the body was clearly influenced by the left, with Communists playing key roles.

The American military government refused to cooperate with the KPR. Equating events in Korea with those in Eastern Europe, the American military authorities easily accepted the argument that the KPR was under Soviet domination and therefore subversive. Lieutenant General John R. Hodge, the Commanding General of U.S. Army Forces in Korea, summarily dismissed Yeo's claim to legitimacy. He then outlawed the people's committees and created new local councils under conservative control.

Because former Japanese food controls had broken down, the American military government felt the need to inaugurate a new rice policy. At the time, the Americans, aided only by complete faith in

6. United States Armed Forces in Korea (n.d. vol. 3, ch. 4, 50)

free private enterprise and a sublime ignorance, thought it “inadvisable to attempt to regulate the market too strictly,” since a free market was “felt to be more in keeping with democratic principles.”⁷ Thus, on October 5, 1945, the American military government issued General Notice no. 1, which stipulated the establishment of a free market for rice: “all laws and regulations having the force of law . . . are hereby abolished to the end that Korea may have a free market in rice.” It struck down all laws and provisions prohibiting “the private and free sale of rice,” or requiring the sale of rice to government agencies, or limiting in any way “the freedom of prices in the purchase and sale of rice to anyone.”⁸ This notice was followed by one establishing a “free commodity market” in all goods except those managed by government monopolies, such as tobacco, salt, opium, sugar, and medicines, and those the military government might deem to be “in critical demand.” In other words, “free market conditions will be maintained so far as practical.”⁹ In the end, Ordinance no. 19 read:

[The American military government is] restoring the principle of a free market, giving to every man, woman, and child within the country equal opportunity to enjoy his just and fair share of the great wealth [with] which this beautiful nation has been endowed.¹⁰

This policy decision apparently came about through a natural American inclination toward allowing the free play of economic forces of supply and demand. Also, the Americans thought that rigid control of rice would be impossible. An American military government official was quoted at the time as saying that “we didn’t have the forces to police such a [control] system, anyhow.”¹¹ Therefore, the American military government’s free market policy was driven by American

7. “The Rice Problem,” in XXIV Corps Historical File.

8. Office of the Military Governor, USAMGIK (October 5, 1945).

9. Office of the Military Governor, USAMGIK (October 20, 1945).

10. Office of the Military Governor, USAMGIK (October 30, 1945).

11. Lauterbach (1947, 218).

economic theory and pragmatic necessity. Furthermore, it was in line with the American policy of not acknowledging the KPR and people’s committees.

Unfortunately, the attempt to establish a free market resulted in complete disaster, because South Korea at the time had not reached the economic stage of development to be able to accept a free market system. A vast majority of Korean peasants were concerned with subsistence cultivation and accustomed to having surpluses extracted by landlords and their agents rather than exchanged in market transactions. Furthermore, most Korean landlords were not capitalists who could turn increased profits from the sale of rice into substantial investments. In general, they were accustomed to sapping surpluses and giving very little in return. Instead of a free market, a landlord-dominated market system persisted, without the administrative structure that had previously controlled it.¹²

The immediate effect of the free market policy was a steep rise in the price of rice and resultant hoarding and speculation. Poor distribution of food led to food shortages and hunger in cities, despite a bumper harvest in 1945. Additionally, the rice-based South Korean economy inevitably began to suffer from massive inflation. It was quite natural then that the black-market should grow and prosper; it was expected that the lure of black market prices would stimulate the flow of rice into the black market. The result was that “rice disappeared almost entirely from the market.”¹³ Through its free market policy, the U.S. military government lost the main strength of the South Korean economy—its ability to extract large surpluses of grain—and caused in its stead spiraling inflation, near starvation in early

12. Cumings (1981, 203-204).

13. “Narrative History of the National Food Administration,” in XXIV Corps Historical File; see also “The Rice Problem,” in XXIV Corps Historical File. The fall rice harvest in 1945 proved to be a “bumper crop,” with predictions that at least a one-million-bag surplus would be available for export from South Korea. Therefore, according to U.S. accounts, “a rice shortage seemed the one thing [the American military government] would not need to worry about.” See United States Armed Forces in Korea (n.d. vol. 3, ch. 6, 25-26); also “The Rice Problem,” in XXIV Corps Historical File.

1946, and a general economic breakdown.

The price of a bushel of rice increased from 9.4 yen in September 1945 to 2,800 yen in September 1946.¹⁴ Landlords, police and other government officials, and wealthy individuals engaged in speculation on a wholesale basis. Richard Robinson, who was Chief of the Public Opinion Section of the Department of Information of the USAMGIK and later a historian attached to the G-2 Intelligence Headquarters of the XXIV Corps until his departure from Korea in 1947, reported that a top police official “made a private fortune by shipping rice illegally into Seoul and selling it at enormous prices.” He also said that “a flourishing smuggling trade” in rice developed between South Korea and Japan that might have eaten up one-fourth of the 1945 harvest.¹⁵ An official American source stated, “Korean rice runners and Japanese smugglers meet at sea, exchanging the products of their lands against Allied directives.”¹⁶ According to another official source, it was estimated that smugglers were shipping 300 bags of rice a day to Japan.¹⁷ A great deal of rice in Chungcheongnam-do province, one of the granaries of South Korea, was shipped out of the province by speculators during the winter of 1945/1946. In one incident, a speculator from Busan purchased ten railroad cars full of rice from Nonsan, in the same province.¹⁸ Thus, for the rice policy to succeed in South Korea, the American military government was encouraged to “combat hoarders, profiteers, and those who smuggle rice to Japan for black market sale.”¹⁹

14. United States Armed Forces in Korea (n.d. vol. 3, ch. 6, 5).

15. Robinson (1947, 77, 151).

16. “Civil Affairs in Occupied and Liberated Territory,” no. 100 (February 21, 1946, 41), in XXIV Corps Historical File.

17. Reports of such smuggling continued. On March 12, 1946, when the shortage became acute and there developed the threat of actual starvation, Military Governor, Major General Archer L. Lerch, told the Korean press that “the abundance of tangerines and oranges in the markets of Seoul indicates that smuggling to Japan is still going on.” See “The Rice Problem,” in XXIV Corps Historical File.

18. United States Armed Forces in Korea (n.d. vol. 3, ch. 3, 31).

19. “Rice Collection and Distribution Policy of Military Government,” September 29, 1946, in XXIV Corps Historical File.

The disastrous shortage of rice in South Korea caused the deterioration of Soviet-U.S. relations. The Americans and the Soviets held a joint conference to consider administrative-economic matters of mutual concern to the American and Soviet military authorities in Korea from January 16 to February 5, 1946 in Seoul. While the Americans favored complete administrative and economic integration, the Soviets sought the exchange of goods alone. In particular, the Russians came with one fixed goal in mind: to secure South Korean rice for the hungry population of North Korea.²⁰ It was little wonder that the Soviets thought “the Americans were lying through their teeth” when they suddenly announced in the conference that “there existed a severe rice shortage in South Korea.” Only a short time before, the Soviets had heard an American pronouncement to the effect that there was a surplus of rice. “How did that happen?” they asked. The Russians undoubtedly came to the conclusion that the Americans were trying to intentionally undermine the Soviet administration in North Korea by preventing the use of surplus South Korean rice to alleviate the very critical food situation in North Korea. All that North Korea wanted was rice, and the Americans did not have it. It was over this critical issue that the joint conference stalled and ended in failure.²¹

The American military government was flooded with complaints and petitions from Koreans demanding that price control and rationing be resumed and that the American military government take drastic action to stop rice hoarding. In many cases, it had been charged that the American military government was reluctant to move against the principal hoarders “because they were respectable Korean businessmen upon whom [the American military government] was relying for support and advice.”²² It became evident that

20. Robinson (1947, 74-75).

21. Robinson (1947, 79-80).

22. Lauterbach (1947, 219). The conservative Korean Democratic Party (KDP) was reported to favor lifting price controls and allowing free transactions of rice from the start. See G-2 “Weekly Summary,” no. 29, (March 24-31, 1946), in XXIV Corps Historical File.

“controls must be reimposed upon cereals if starvation were to be prevented.”²³

As a result, by February 1946, the American military government had not only rescinded the free market but had ordered rice rationing. Since there was practically no rice in the hunger-stricken cities, rationing was first instituted there.²⁴ Indeed, the shortage was evident throughout the country. Everywhere, people thought, spoke, and wrote about one subject: food—which meant rice to Koreans. Newspapers published accounts of famine and starvation. The people generally seem to have been confused, frightened, and uncertain.²⁵ The food situation was so serious that in the summer of 1946 the American military government began to worry about the possible appearance of the so-called “rice Communists,” who might agitate the rice-hungry people to revolt.

During March 1946, people staged demonstrations in several cities to protest their slim rations. On March 28, the American military government announced that there was not enough rice for everybody, but that those who needed it most would get a regular supply. With very meager food stocks available during the first half of the year, the average ration was only one *hop* per person per day, or half the Japanese allowance during the Pacific War. Massive starvation was averted from May 1946 only by U.S. emergency relief under the Government Aid and Relief in Occupied Areas (GARIOA) program, intended to avert disease and unrest that might threaten U.S. forces. The receipt of U.S. grains made it possible to gradually increase the rations.²⁶

23. “The Economic Situation of South Korea,” October 4, 1947, in XXIV Corps Historical File.

24. On February 13, 1946, the American military government admitted that “the shortage of rice in the city [of Seoul] is serious.” “The Rice Problem,” in XXIV Corps Historical File. See also “Narrative History of the National Food Administration.”

25. “The Rice Problem,” in XXIV Corps Historical File. An official source reported that at the time “hunger was widespread and food riots were not uncommon.” See “The Economic Situation of South Korea,” in XXIV Corps Historical File.

26. “Narrative History of the National Food Administration,” in XXIV Corps Historical File. One *hop* equaled 150 grams, or 525 calories. See “The Economic Situation of

Revival of the Rice Collection System

The deteriorating food situation forced the Americans to revive the old Japanese rice collection system. They were convinced that the only remedy for the disasters of the free market policy was to put the old rice collection system back into effect, thereby “virtually reestablishing the Japanese system.”²⁷ The American military government issued Ordinance no. 45, “National Rice Collection,” on January 25, 1946 “to ensure against wide scale starvation, malnutrition, disease, and civil unrest.” This ordinance called for the collection of all excess rice in South Korea.²⁸

Collection of rice, more broadly grain, was to be carried out in four ways. First, unlike the Japanese, who collected only rice, the American military government was to collect barley, called *hagok*, or summer grain, because it was harvested in summer, as well as rice, called *chugok*, or autumn grain, which was similarly harvested in autumn. Since the yield of rice was always more than three times that of barley, however, rice was the main target for collection. Second, the entire delivery quota, which would be assigned to the farming population for collection, was to be based on the premise that at least 2.5 *hop*, or 1,313 calories, per day were required by a non-farming consumer. Third, all the grains in excess of self-consumption were to be collected. The purchasing prices were to be set by the American military government, and payment was to be made in cash or by written certificate payable when the grains were delivered to warehouses of the Korean Commodity Company, the renamed successor of the Japanese Chosen Food Company. Fourth, rent for tenancy was all to be collected in kind. Landlords were to receive their tenancy rent in cash and, like non-farming consumers, were to receive rice rations.

South Korea,” in XXIV Corps Historical File. The Japanese ration in 1939 was 2.1 to 2.3 *hop*. See “Food Report for South Korea as of March 1948,” in XXIV Corps Historical File.

27. United States Armed Forces in Korea (n.d. vol. 3, ch. 4, 51).

28. Office of the Military Governor, USAMGIK (January 25, 1946).

Because the price of black-market rice was 7.6 times the purchasing price of collected rice, farmers wanted their rice to be sold on the black market rather than be collected by the military government. Their reluctance to comply with rice collection led the American military government to enforce it by all means necessary.

Since the American military government's reestablishment of rice collections was reminiscent of Japanese control, it was not popular with the farmers. They "naturally were not in sympathy with government collections." Thus, Jo Bong-am, later the first Minister of Agriculture of the Republic of Korea, stated in 1948, "instead of forced collection program, his plan would be a rice purchase program."²⁹

Ordinance no. 45 placed provincial rice collections in the hands of village elders and local notables, city, county, and township officials, and in the hands of the police.³⁰ Local boards, "appointed with American approval and composed of high police officials, village elders, businessmen, and large landowners," set rice quotas for farmers. The boards allowed no appeals on the quotas, and farmers often went to jail where they were severely beaten and refused trial when they failed to fulfill the quotas.³¹

Opposition to the rice collection program was evident particularly in the heavy rice producing districts. When met with opposition, stern enforcement measures were employed. For example, the use of American troops was authorized to crush opposition.³² While the American military government insisted that opposition to the rice collection program stemmed wholly from Communist propaganda spread among the peasants, Richard Robinson maintained that the Korean police were more responsible for peasants' opposition to the

29. "Narrative History of the National Food Administration." Another official source stressed that "the farmer has always hated the rice collections." See U.S. Army Military Government in Korea, Department of Information, "Political Trends," no. 43, March 15-31, 1947, Seoul, Korea.

30. USAMGIK (n.d. no. 45, January 25, 1946).

31. Robinson (1947, 149).

32. "Narrative History of the National Food Administration." See also "The Rice Problem."

rice collections.³³

When the American military government was established, its chief concern was the maintenance of law and order. Thus the American occupation authorities hastened to empower the police and the military as the main agencies that would achieve this goal. Reorganization of the police began soon after the advent of the military government. The first plan was to initially utilize the Japanese police while training Koreans to replace them. This proved impossible because the Korean people were very angry at the continued authority of the hated Japanese police. The next plan was to advertise for trained Korean policemen to join the new police force. The result was a wholesale reemployment of Koreans from the former colonial police force. According to one source, some 80 percent of the Koreans formerly employed in the Japanese police were retained on the Korean police force.³⁴ By October 1945, the Korean National Police (KNP) force was established.

The rice collection function that had been taken away from the Korean National Police in the fall of 1945 was restored in the wake of the failure of the free market policy.³⁵ With its strong political power, the KNP became the chief administrator of rice collections. An American source stated that "various evil practices were widespread" in rice collections performed by the police.³⁶ The KNP proceeded to establish "rice details" to accommodate this duty, in which policemen worked alone or with non-police rice collection officials. Frequently, they worked by themselves "with no idea of the quotas assigned" and "on their own initiative." Many policemen were pun-

33. Robinson (1947, 149).

34. Wedemeyer (1947, 6:802).

35. The Japanese police in colonial Korea fulfilled a wide variety of functions, including rice collection, and the extent of their power was equaled in only a few countries of the modern world. When the Americans created the Korean National Police in October 1945, they restricted police functions to the maintenance of civil order and prevention and detection of crime. By 1947, however, the police had grown so powerful as to be considered the one strongly cohesive force in South Korean political life.

36. "History of the Department of the Police," in XXIV Corps Historical File.

ished and even dismissed for not meeting their collection quotas, on the assumption that they were skimming rice for their personal use.³⁷ Thus, the policemen were harsh and brutal in their methods of collecting rice and tended to single out peasants who were associated with people's committees or peasant unions. The peasants who were suspected of leftist political activity were often given high collection quotas.

Those farmers "who refused to give up their rice were taken to police headquarters and kept in jail with no food except that bought from the police at exorbitant prices." The people complained that "rice was taken away under the Japanese but their treatment [is] worse."³⁸ Richard Robinson reported that in one province alone, over one thousand farmers were arrested as of January 20, 1947 for alleged failure to fulfill 1946 rice quotas.³⁹ Choe Neung-jin, Chief of the KNP Detective Bureau, reported to the Joint Korean-American Conference in November 1946:

I have gone around to the farmers and have been informed by them that during the summer, policemen went out to the farmers blindly, without knowing what the quota assignment was and attempted to force the farmers to turn over their rice. If they did not, the police handcuffed them and took them to the police station where they were held all day, sometimes without any food at all. Sometimes they were locked in jail.⁴⁰

The police were also corrupt in administering rice collections. Frequently the amount of rice demanded was unreasonable, and there was very good reason to believe that much of the grain, including rice, was not turned over to the proper authorities.⁴¹ American inves-

37. United States Armed Forces in Korea (n.d. vol. 3, ch. 4, 43, 50-51, 53).

38. "History of the Department of the Police," in XXIV Corps Historical File.

39. Robinson (1947, 284).

40. Minutes of the Fifteenth Joint Korean-American Conference, November 15, 1946; in U.S. Department of State, Record Group 43, U.S.-U.S.S.R. Joint Commission on Korea.

41. "History of the Department of the Police."

tigators often found stocks of rice in the houses of policemen during the October people's riots in 1946.⁴² Peasant grievances over rice collections, particularly the corruption and the cruel and arbitrary methods of the police, were the major cause of the riots of 1946.⁴³

Under these circumstances, grain collection was carried out throughout the period of the U.S. military occupation. As the years went by, collection results improved, which is demonstrated in the following table.

Table 1. Grain Collections, 1945-1948

(Unit: 1,000 *seok*, %)

| | Chugok (1945) | Hagok (1946) | Chugok (1946) | Hagok (1947) | Chugok (1947) | Hagok (1948) |
|-------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Yields | 12,835 | 4,963 | 12,047 | 3,227 | 13,850 | 4,737 |
| Quotas | 5,511 | 1,289 | 4,295 | 707 | 5,156 | 751 |
| Collections | 681 | 619 | 3,562 | 699 | 5,068 | 754 |
| A | 42.9 | 26.0 | 35.7 | 21.9 | 37.2 | 15.9 |
| B | 12.4 | 48.0 | 82.9 | 98.9 | 98.3 | 100.4 |

* One *seok* equaled 150 kilograms.

** A: quotas/yields; B: collections/quotas

*** source: Cha Nam-Hee (1997, 134-136).

The non-farming population was put on rations. On March 13, 1946, the American military government announced that at least 2.5 *hop* of rice per person per day were to be rationed. A non-farmer was to be given an individual ration card, to draw his rations at a ration station, and to make payment according to the rice price set by the American military government. Members of the National Police, the Constabulary, the Coast Guard, and crew who did not live at their

42. United States Armed Forces in Korea (n.d. vol. 3, ch. 4, 52).

43. American delegation to the U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission, memorandum on interviews with nineteen Gyeongsangbuk-do province officials, October 14, 1946, in XXIV Corps Historical File.

permanent residences and frequently moved from place to place were to be rationed through their representatives.⁴⁴ The number of rations recipients was roughly 6.9 million in 1946, 8.5 million in 1947, and 9.6 million in 1948.⁴⁵ Since the estimated South Korean population as of April 1948 was some 20 million, recipients of rations amounted to 48 percent of the whole population in 1948.

The average ration per person per day was 1.2 *hop*, or 630 calories, in 1946, 2.3 *hop*, or 1,228 calories, in 1947, and 2.4 *hop*, or 1,236 calories, in 1948. Since the actual ration fell short of the minimum ration (2.5 *hop*) promised by the American military government, South Korean consumers had to make up the difference via the black market. The black market prospered to the extent that some 15 percent of the 1946 rice yields and 24 percent of the 1947 rice yields were estimated to have been channeled to the black market.⁴⁶ Since the price of rice on the black market was usually 5.25 times that of rationed rice, South Korean rice consumers had to struggle against hard times, when expenses for the staple food amounted to 30 percent of the total living expenses for a household.

Rice and Korean Domestic Politics

Because of its overwhelming importance in Korean life and the extremely bad practices involved in its collections, rice exerted great influence on South Korean domestic politics. The main food staple had continued to be a powder keg in Korean politics until a South Korean government (Republic of Korea) was formally inaugurated on August 15, 1948. During the American occupation period, some two-thirds of agrarian disturbances were caused by forcible rice collection.⁴⁷ In particular, the controversial rice collection was one of the

44. *Donga Ilbo*, March 4, 1946.

45. Kim (2000, 217).

46. Kim (2000, 226).

47. Kim (2000, 215).

main causes of the so-called "October People's Resistance," a spontaneous uprising by the people, in 1946.

On September 24, 1946, the members of the South Korean Railroad Workers Association in Busan presented to the USAMGIK Department of Transportation, their employer, demands for an increased rice ration and pay allowances, for abolishment of daily wage handouts (designed to enforce attendance), for lunches on the job, and for cessation of reductions in the work force.⁴⁸ The requests aroused the sympathy of other workers who were suffering from mounting inflation, but their demands were not answered. The next day, railroad workers began striking. Rail transportation was soon paralyzed. The railroad strike quickly combined with protests against forced grain collections to completely engulf the southeastern provinces. The October People's Resistance began and lasted into December. The collection of summer grains, which had just finished, caused great anxiety because crop yields fell 40 percent below normal, and the shortfall in the approaching rice harvest was expected to be 20 percent.⁴⁹

The October disturbances were highly selective and directed primarily against the police, who lost more than four hundred of their members in brutal executions. The police quotas for rice collection showed partiality to anticommunists and thus gave leftists incentive to stir up sentiment against the police by spreading rumors that the United States was imitating Japan in siphoning off Korean rice and dumping cheaper grains on Korea.⁵⁰

The Joint Korean-American Conference met after the people's uprising to look into the causes of the riots. The conference, participated in by Korean and American representatives, suggested the rice collection program was one of the main causes of the riots. Other causes included enmity against the police and inflation.⁵¹

48. *Seoul Times*, September 25, 1946.

49. Henderson (1968, 145).

50. Henderson (1968, 145-146).

51. Special Press Release, October 26, 1946, in XXIV Corps Historical File.

Extensive and coercive methods existed at all levels of the rice collection process. A Korean farmer testified before the Joint Korean-American Conference on December 9, 1946:

[In spite of the insufficient amount of food for the village,] the *myeon* [township] insisted that we must pay [the allotted amount]. We went in three or four times to petition the Military Government and the *gun* [county]. The reply was, "if you are just agitators, you fellows—you have to give as we have requested, otherwise we will arrest you." People cannot live under such orders The police came and took the young men and women and bound their hands and led them around the villages. Therefore, the people are afraid that in the fall collection [of next year] the same process will be repeated.⁵²

Because of these bad practices, rice collection became a target of criticism by the domestic Korean press. Questioning the wisdom of the means of collection, the *Chosun Ilbo* suggested that rice collection "should be made from the New Korea Company land [owned and managed by the American military government], former Japanese-owned farms, and landlords rather than from tenants."⁵³ Around the same time, Lieutenant General Hodge, through General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Japan, reported to the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

The rice collection program, believed essential to our program but unpopular to all Koreans, is to be used to increase opposition to AMG and to set off the fuse The hate campaign against American efforts convinces me that we can only enforce that portion of our current grain collections which provides for collection rentals in kind from [the New Korea Company] tenants and that collection from individual farmers on any enforced basis may cause a real revolution, regardless of necessity to Korean life.

According to the telegram, Hodge emphasized that rice collections to

52. Minutes of the Twenty-Sixth Korean-American Conference, December 9, 1946; in Record Group 43, U.S.-U.S.S.R. Joint Commission on Korea.

53. Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Army Forces in Pacific (1946, 84).

be obtained from individual farmers might have to be based on voluntary sales only to the American military government.⁵⁴

During the 1947-1948 rice collections, it was found that many small farmers in the provinces were saddled with a disproportionately high quota, whereas those assigned to many large farmers were comparatively low. In some cases, practically the entire amount of rice was collected from small farmers. This assignment of quotas was apparently due to the reluctance of local officials to assign proper quotas to rich, influential landlords.⁵⁵ The unjust quota, which was heavily applied to small farmers, was greatly unfavorable to them, because the poor small farmers had to sell their rice at the low, government ceiling price and at the same time buy their other commodities at highly inflated prices elsewhere.

The South Korean Interim Legislative Assembly (SKILA), created in December 1946 in accordance with Washington's "Koreanization" policy, pointed out other bad practices of the rice collection system. After investigating the 1947-1948 rice collections, one member of the assembly reported on the peasants' general complaints on December 16, 1947:

(1) High quotas were established without the actual investigation of the farming district. (2) The rice inspectors were not at the collection points at the proper time and were not under the jurisdiction and resultant control of local government officials.

Other members, including Chairman Kim Gyu-sik, unanimously stated that the rice quotas were too high compared with the yields of rice crops. One member insisted that "further rice collection should be suspended because of the unfair burden it placed on the farmers."⁵⁶

54. General of the Army MacArthur to the Chief of Staff, October 28, 1946, in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946* (1971, 8: 750-751).

55. "Narrative History of the National Food Administration," in XXIV Corps Historical File.

56. National Economic Board, United States Army Military Government in Korea (1947, 153-154).

But the SKILA failed to take any definite actions to solve the problems in the rice collection program because of the opposition of conservative members and the reluctance of the American military government.

The American military government's efforts to strengthen South Korea against Communist domination tended to lead it toward the establishment of a separate southern government. In early 1947, Washington thoroughly reconsidered its policy toward South Korea. As the United States acknowledged that the creation of a separate government was unavoidable, it referred the Korean question to the United Nations. At first, the international forum recommended that elections, supervised by the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK), be held across the peninsula. Since the Soviet Union refused to admit the UNTCOK to North Korea, however, the United Nations later proposed that the UNTCOK observe elections for representatives to a national assembly, which would be held on May 10, 1948, in those areas of Korea accessible to the Commission, namely South Korea.

During the period of registration (from April 5 to 10, 1948), 7,837,504 voters actually registered. According to a UNTCOK report, the estimated population in South Korea on April 1, 1948 was 19,947,000. The possible total of registrants, based on the percentage of 49.3 as derived from the 1947 National Registration, was 9,834,000. On this basis, the number of registrants was some 79.7 percent of the potential electorate.⁵⁷ But the high percentage of registration did not necessarily give an accurate reflection of the popular will. During the registration period, delegates of the UNTCOK toured the country to observe and investigate the registration of voters. Some of them came back with the impression, gathered from interviews and press reports, that the very high registration number could be partly explained by police threats to withdraw individual rice

57. "Report of the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea on the Elections of May 10, 1948," in Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Congress, Senate (1953, 18).

ration cards from those who failed to register.⁵⁸

Conclusion: American Military Occupation Policy: A Failure?

Like many other historical topics, the American military occupation policy of Korea can be praised or criticized. According to the conventional version, the policy was a success story. Many scholars, Americans and Koreans, have declared that the United States built a free and democratic nation in South Korea as a showcase of democracy against Communist North Korea. But revisionist scholars have suggested a very different picture. They argue that the occupation policy failed to consider the will and wishes of the Korean people.

The American military occupation policy might be considered successful, in that the United States effectively kept South Korea as non-Communist and under American influence against communized North Korea. However, the Americans, in fear of Communism, lost their opportunity to achieve their declared basic goals, including the establishment of a free, democratic, and unified state, in Korea. As the American military occupation policy in South Korea failed to consider Korean needs and demands, it could be judged a failure. Although the American military government generally acted with diligence and fairness, it made a lot of mistakes and was swayed by conservative bias.

One of the greatest failures of the American military occupation policy was its rice policy. Bertram Sarafan, an attorney who served with the American military government, reported on his return to the United States that "as a result of its handling of the rice problem, the Koreans arrived at a complete loss of faith in the Military Government." South Koreans labeled the American administration "ineffectual and bungling."⁵⁹ American rice policy in South Korea resulted in a difficult economic situation for the Korean population, particularly

58. Gordenker (1959, 97-98).

59. Robinson (1947, 220).

for the poor masses; it also negatively affected the politics of the American military government and American-Soviet relations on the Korean peninsula.

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