

The Cold War Explodes in Kobe—"The 1948 Korean Ethnic School "Riots" and US Occupation Authorities

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Summary

In March and April 1948 Koreans across Japan rose up in protest after the Japanese government began to enforce an order handed down to them by the American Occupation administration to close Korean ethnic schools. One such protest took place in Kobe on April 24 when Koreans stormed the Hyogo Prefecture offices in an attempt to get the governor to rescind the order to close the four Korean ethnic schools in the prefecture. American and Japanese administrations reacted harshly to the Korean actions. Police arrested thousands of Koreans and inflicted stiff penalties on the incident's leaders. As was often the case, the Occupation administration misinterpreted Korean intention to keep the schools open as a leftist attempt to disrupt U.S. occupations in Korea and Japan. Here the incident is examined through the eyes of one Occupation employee, Elizabeth Ryan, a 31-year old court reporter who included detailed information on the incident and its participants in personal letters that she sent to her family in the United States.

At around 10:30 on the morning of April 24, 1948 four men, three Koreans and one Japanese, stormed into the Hyogo Prefecture Building (*kenchō*) and demanded an audience with Governor Kishida Yukio. Their purpose remained unchanged from previous attempts to

see the governor—to discuss his April 10 order that the four Korean ethnic schools in his jurisdiction cease operations and that the students be transferred to Japanese schools. Kishida, who was at another meeting, informed their Japanese spokesman, Horikawa Kazutomo, that he would see them later. One half-hour later, the governor was told that about one hundred Koreans had forced their way into the building. He soon heard them yelling "Open up, open up. We will kill you," as they destroyed one of his outer offices. Then 50 to 60 Koreans forced their way into Kishida's office by breaking down the wall that separated his office from the outer office they had been destroying. They cut his telephone lines, trashed his furniture, and began roughing up the governor and the mayor of Kobe, who had been meeting with Kishida.

The intruders then sat the governor at his desk and the three negotiators, Kim Daisam [T'aesam], Kim Yongho, and Ryang Minseo [Minsŏ], presented their demands. Kishida was to rescind his order to close the Korean schools, release the 65 Koreans arrested during a previous incident at the assistant governor's office, and see to it that no one involved in the present incident faced prosecution. At 12:30 three United States Military Police officers arrived and attempted to escort Kishida to safety. However, a crowd of Koreans who had gathered in the building prevented them from doing so. The crowd also roughed up the Military Policemen, lifting one "off his feet." When one of the policemen drew his pistol a Korean woman bared her chest and baited him to "shoot here." Negotiations finally ended around 17:00 when the governor agreed in

writing to release those arrested during the previous incident.

Koreans surround Governor Kishida in his office

Throughout the day a crowd had been assembling outside the prefecture building. Captain Roy M. Johnson reported that by 11:30 these people, who numbered over 3000, “had ceased to be a crowd; [they had formed] a mob.” Their presence prevented help from entering the building until a team of 150 policemen succeeded in physically dragging “actively resisting” people away and roped off the area. When at 17:00 one of the intruders announced from a window that the governor had rescinded his order to close the schools “the mob went crazy” and “marched down Illinois Avenue” waving the Korean flag. [1]

Korean residents march on the Hyogo Prefectural Office

Their jubilation was short-lived. That evening, SCAP [Supreme Commander Allied Powers], which had ordered the schools closed in the first place, issued its first (and only) state of emergency during its seven-year tenure in Japan. From midnight the Kobe police, acting on orders from Eighth Army Commander General Robert Eichelberger, went on a “Korean hunt” (*ChÅsenjin gari*) that aimed to arrest anyone who “looked Korean.” The hunt rounded up 1,732 people, including Okinawans, Taiwanese, and Japanese, of whom 39 were tried for “leading demonstrations.” [2] Later that day, Japanese police entered the Korean ethnic schools, physically removed the students, and nailed shut their doors.

Eichelberger also rescinded the promises that the governor had made to the Koreans on April 24. In total, 75 people (including one Japanese) were brought to trial and, save for four acquitted Koreans, all were found guilty of one or more of the following charges: unlawfully entering the governor’s office, destroying office

furnishings, threatening the governor, detaining the governor, interfering with Occupation and Hyogo Prefecture communications, and assaulting Occupation force members. The four people who initiated the incident, along with three other Koreans, were tried by the U.S. Military Commission and received sentences ranging from 10 to 15 years of hard labor. Nine other Koreans, tried by the General Provost Court of Kobe, received sentences that ranged from three months to four years and nine months of hard labor. Fifty-two Koreans were fined 50 yen. [3]

Koreans on trial in Kobe

The court summary provided explicit details of the destructive and violent actions of the Korean participants, but failed to adequately consider the anger and frustration that fueled them. We learn of the intruders’ primary motivation—to make the governor rescind his order to close the schools—only through the demands that they issued to the governor. The court summary did not explain the reasons why SCAP ordered the schools’ closures. Nor did it offer explanation as to why the Korean people might react to this order as they did. It also neglected to note the attempts that Koreans had made to gain audiences with the governor prior to April 24, or the governor’s stonewalling—his office had told the Koreans that the governor was out of town—to avoid having to meet them. [4]

The tone of the court summary reflected the negative attitudes that Americans and Japanese directed toward “uncooperative” elements in Japan at the time, among whom included Koreans residing in both Japan and Korea. As today, the over 650,000 Japan-based Koreans then represented the country’s largest alien population. The arrogant attitude that many Koreans had adopted at the war’s end toward their former colonial masters had gained them

a reputation as troublemakers in the eyes of both American and Japanese authorities. Their insistence on educating their children in Korean ethnic schools irked particularly the U.S. administration in at least two ways. Americans first saw their recalcitrance as an insult to U.S. authority as it blatantly defied SCAP orders that they integrate their children into the Japanese school system. Secondly, it demonstrated again the generally uncooperative behavior that Koreans had displayed throughout the duration of the Occupation to date, be it through working in black markets or collaborating with the Japanese Communist Party. To many, the obvious solution to the Korean problem was that they all be sent “home.” Yet, this was not easy for a number of reasons, including the fact that many younger Japan-based Koreans knew of no other home than Japan.

Letters sent by Elizabeth Ryan, a court reporter stationed in Kobe from 1947-1948, to her family in Milwaukee, Wisconsin expanded on the court summary’s descriptions of the Kobe “riots” by articulating general impressions that Americans and Japanese held toward the incident, the Korean participants, as well as the Korean people in general. [5] Her writing thus provides a window that enhances our understanding of the incident from the Japan-based American perspective. Ryan’s letters also suggest outside influence from her colleagues. Their content thus informs us of the general conceptions (and misconceptions) that Occupation and Japanese administrations held toward Koreans in Japan, but also in southern Korea. Furthermore, these perspectives contribute to our understanding of how the United States viewed long-held conflicts between Japanese and Koreans, and the growing political unrest in southern Korea that contributed to the outbreak of civil war in 1950.

Elizabeth Ryan (left) with friends in Kobe

The Korean “Rioters” Slapped Uncle Sam in the Face

The details that Elizabeth Ryan entered into her letters reflected positively those recorded in the court summary outlined above, though she admitted that her information came primarily from a shortwave broadcast out of Los Angeles. [6] She first addressed the “riots” in an April 27, 1948 letter that she sent to alert her family of her safety. Here Ryan described the incident and accused the Koreans of insulting the United States—they slapped Uncle Sam’s face—by refusing to send their children to Japanese schools as required by Japan’s recently promulgated constitution.

“What it boils down to is this. The Japanese constitution, under which they are now to run their country, was set up by SCAP (Supreme Commander Allied Powers, the organization revolving around Mac [MacArthur]) and it called for a certain schools system with a certain curriculum, etc. The Japanese have accepted it and are putting it into effect, which means closing the 4 Korean schools in Kobe. The Koreans don’t want their children to go to Japanese schools and have protested. While that may be well and good, it is really not the Japanese idea in the school but the American, and so indirectly a slap in the face for Uncle Sam because the Koreans have rejected the school system. On Saturday morning 70 Koreans visited the Prefecture headquarters and really tore things apart. The Governor had them put in jail—and that set off the fire.”

The incident spread concern, as indicated by the power display that SCAP demonstrated in its immediate aftermath, that it would spread

throughout Japan. Ryan wrote that General Menoher's declaration of "minor state of emergency" bought the Occupation's top officials to Kobe. Soon after, orders went out to arrest "every last Korean." Her observations here reflect the seriousness with which SCAP viewed the incident, perhaps because of its generally negative impression of Japan's Korean population. She writes:

"Headquarters Kobe Base (Shinko Bldg) looked for all the world like it might be the gold deposit for the world—all the cars lined up in front in "stand by", guards with helmets and guns patrolling every 10 feet—an air of excitement all over. The order went out from the "brains" that every last Korean was to be arrested and by 4 o'clock last evening they had 1500 of them in jail."

Ryan predicted that the Koreans would be tried fairly, but then suggested that they may be made scapegoats so as to discourage the outbreak of similar incidents in the future.

"Special courts and staffs of lawyers are coming down from Tokyo and Yokohama to assist in the speedy trial of these people. They will be tried in our Provost Court instead of the Japanese court—and they probably will get it, but good. I have heard from some of the officers who were in the conference that it really wasn't too bad, but if we let it go by unnoticed, the way things have gone in the rest of the world, this could be only the beginning."

Ryan returned home just as the trials reached their conclusion and thus she does not comment further on the actual sentencing of those involved. Her short reports of the incident are as informative for what they contain as they are for what they omit. Her

suggestion that the Kobe incident might serve as the first of a series of riots across Japan curiously ignores the fact that the Kobe incident was just the most recent of a series of similar incidents that took place in Yamaguchi (March 31), Okayama (April 8), Hyogo (April 10), Osaka (April 12), and Tokyo (April 20). [7] A second Osaka demonstration held on April 26 attracted 30,000 people.

Also striking is her contention that the Koreans violated United States, rather than Japanese, law—by rejecting the constitutionally authorized Japanese school system they slapped Uncle Sam's face. She elaborated on this point in a May 4 letter where she wrote "SCAP...set up a constitution which was accepted by the Japanese and the allied powers as workable. In the constitution it stated that a certain school system would be set up—the whole curriculum has to be changed to weed out their former teachings against democracy, etc. The Koreans had their own schools, 4 of which were in Kobe, and would not move out of their school buildings."

Her claim that Japan's postwar constitution legitimized closing the Korean ethnic schools is problematic in a number of ways. First, this document had much to say about promoting a democratic education system but nothing to say about the curriculum that would guide this education. The constitution's "education clause," Article 26, reads as follows:

"All people shall have the right to an equal education correspondent to their ability, as provided for by law. 2) All people shall be obligated to have all boys and girls under their protection receive ordinary education as provided for by law. Such compulsory education shall be free." [8]

If anything, this document, in requiring "equal education correspondent to their ability" legitimized the Korean ethnic schools'

continued existence. Indeed, after receiving orders to close these schools Japanese lawmakers debated whether this action would constitute a violation of this very document. [9]

The Fundamental Law of Education (*Kyōiku kihonhō*) passed in March 1947 reinforced the rights guaranteed by Japan's postwar constitution. Sometimes described as a revision of the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education, this legislation's preamble declared as Japan's intention to build "a democratic and cultural state" dependent on the "power of education." It stipulated in Article 5 that Japan's education system would be compulsory (*gimu*), and that "nationals" (*kokumin*) would be guaranteed free access to this education. It further stipulated in Article 4 that this education would provide "nationals" with "equal opportunities without discrimination by race, creed, sex, social status, economic position, or family origin."

It was not until later that year, when the Japanese government passed the School Education Act (*Gakkō kyōikuhō*) that we find any mention of the language or content that this education was to assume. Article 21, no. 5 of this legislation stipulated as a goal students being able to "correctly understand the national language (*kokugo* or Japanese) as necessary for their daily lives," and to understand the present conditions and history of their country and villages. It was the formation of the postwar Ministry of Education, rather than legislation, which established the curriculum to which, in SCAP's eyes, the Korean schools should adhere. In January 1947 the Ministry, acting under SCAP orders, notified prefectural governors of their inclusion. This order it had to repeat one year later after the prefectures refused to enforce it. [10]

These documents specifying that their regulations applied to "nationals" (*kokumin*) further complicated Ryan's argument that the

Koreans violated the constitution by refusing to send their children to Japanese schools. Her neglect alerts us to the precarious position that Koreans in Japan faced, particularly regarding their legal status. Ryan might have been aware that in May 1947, just months prior to SCAP's January 1948 announcement that Koreans would be treated as "Japanese nationals," SCAP reversed course by subjecting Japan-based Koreans and Taiwanese to its Alien Registration Ordinance. Mirrored after the U.S. Alien Registration Act of 1940, it required all non-Japanese over the age of 14 to register their alien status and carry with them at all times their alien registration passbook. It further stipulated that violators would face deportation. This legislation served as the forerunner for the more comprehensive Alien Registration Act of 1952 that introduced mandatory fingerprinting of foreign residents. [11]

The Koreans' options were limited. To avoid having their children enrolled in Japanese schools, the Kobe schools could have joined other Korean schools in applying for private school status. This would have permitted their children to study with their Korean, rather than Japanese, counterparts. They would have remained subjected to a Japanese-based curriculum as private schools, as well, were subject to Ministry of Education regulations. Their other option perhaps met the general intentions of the two seemingly contradictory legislative actions by SCAP—to rid Japan of its Korean problem. American residents in Japan, like Ryan, justified this response by claiming that Koreans had no desire to assimilate into Japanese society—they were simply interested in causing trouble—and thus had no business remaining in Japan.

Koreans have been "Pains in the Neck"

The harsh reaction by SCAP to the riots was partially fueled by their generally negative attitude toward the Korean people. Since the

beginning of the occupation they had been rather uncooperative. Soon after the war's end they, along with Japan-based Taiwanese, became active in black market activities. Many Koreans joined the left-wing *Chaeil chosŏ'nin yŏ'ngmaeng* (League of Koreans in Japan) that maintained ties with the Japanese Communist Party. Reports on the Kobe incident emphasized that its leaders belonged to this group, and that their followers, being people of limited intelligence, were easily swayed by this wayward influence. Elizabeth Ryan echoed these views in her letters. On April 27 she remarked that these troublemakers, who were driven by leftist agitators, provided the Japanese police with a test to prove their capacity to maintain law and order:

"The Koreans have been a pain in the neck all along. They have some strange notion that they are the Occupationaires, and really give these Japs a hard time. They go into shops and board street cars with no intention of paying. The poor Jap was scared to do anything about it because he got beat up. So finally, we had to tell them to settle the thing with their own law enforcement agencies (have to let them stand on their feet) and we would back them up to quell rioting, etc. All this Korean business is Communist-instilled." [12]

In an undated letter she repeated the claim that "much [Korean] activity is Communistic" adding that the recent "uprising...among Japanese and Koreans" was hardly unusual—"It happened all the time."

American images of Koreans had never been overly positive. Their negative views were evident in the U.S. being one of the first to recognize Japan's paramount position on the peninsula in 1905, and among the first to bless

its annexation of Korea five years later. Even after the U.S. went to war with Japan, calls could still be heard for Japan to be allowed to keep Korea. [13] A report titled "Aliens in Japan," completed before the end of the war, incorporated many negative attitudes frequently seen in Japanese writing on Koreans:

"The Koreans in Japan are, for the most part, a distinct minority group with a low social and economic position. Koreans generally live apart from Japanese, do not intermarry, and are not assimilated into Japanese life to any great extent. The traditional pattern of Korean migration was based on the seasonal need for labor in Japan and the migrants' desire to return to Korea for the New Year holidays."

The report also borrowed images used by the Japanese (and other colonizers) to justify colonial annexation: The people lacked the "Japanese fever for hard work [and] appear to be slow-moving and lazy." [14]

American Consul Douglas Jenkins, who was stationed in Kobe, also viewed Koreans as left-wing troublemakers, and suggested that they marched to Moscow's orders.

"There are between 60,000 and 70,000 Koreans in Kobe. The great majority of them were imported by the Japanese during the war for manual labor. They are of the low type generally, poorly educated and include among their number a high number of thugs and roughnecks.... This large, boisterous and dissatisfied, alien group in the population of the city is an easy prey to organizers and agitators. They are known to include among their leaders a number of

communists and quasi-communists who probably receive instructions from Northern Korea or, if not that closely associated, certainly follow the party line.” [15]

Ryan and Jenkins’ appraisals of this minority suggest misconceptions of the people’s purpose for both coming and remaining in Japan. The contention that the “great majority” of them came as forced laborers is probably inaccurate. Among the estimated 2.4 million Koreans in Japan at the end of the war, about one-third (or 700,000) were forced to come to Japan to perform hard labor. [16] After the war these people were given high repatriation priority. They thus lacked many of the reasons that prevented Koreans with a more established existence from returning: their inability to bring their entire estate to Korea and their insufficient knowledge of the Korean language and culture. Those who characterized the participants in the incident as “thugs” or “roughnecks” emphasized their actions over their general purpose, to say nothing of their frustrations. Korean frustrations stemmed from having endured forced assimilation during the four decades of colonial rule. To this people, SCAP’s education policies mirrored this colonial-era policy as they forced Koreans to accept a Japanese-centered existence while treating them and the Koreans and their culture as inferior to the Japanese.

The belief that the “rioters” were “communists and quasi-communists [who toed] the party line” also reflected an impression that SCAP officials had developed soon after the war’s end in southern Korea, as well. In mid-September 1945, just weeks after the U.S. had established its Military Government in southern Korea, Political Adviser H. Merrell Benninghoff included the following in his “brief analysis of conditions in Korea.”

“There is little doubt that Soviet agents are spreading their political

thought throughout southern Korea, and several parades and demonstrations in Seoul have admittedly been communist-inspired. Communists advocate the seizure *now* of Japanese properties and may be a threat to law and order. It is probable that well-trained agitators are attempting to bring about chaos in our area so as to cause the Koreans to repudiate the United States in favor of Soviet “freedom” and control. Southern Korea is a fertile ground for such activities because USAFIK lacks sufficient troops to expand its area of control rapidly.” [17]

The connection with Japan came with the smuggling operations that Koreans and Japanese carried out across the East Sea/Japan Sea. Occasionally concerns were voiced in government documents as to whether these operations, in addition to illegally transporting rice, weapons, money, and even people, were solidifying Soviet-North Korea-Japan leftist connections. [18]

These slurs on Korean character neglected to consider why this people objected so strongly to decisions that forced them to live under Japanese jurisdiction despite the hardships they endured under colonial rule. The majority had not been brought to Japan against their will, as Ryan claimed. While, as the “Aliens in Japan” article explained, many of Japan’s Korean minority had resisted assimilation over the last four decades, the actions and attitudes of Japanese had also discouraged those Koreans who wished to live as Japanese. Koreans attending Japanese schools faced discrimination, and upon graduating were generally limited to lower status jobs and positions. After the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake the Japanese police spread baseless rumors that Koreans were committing acts of terror (such as polluting the well water)

that encouraged the senseless slaughter of over 7,000 Japan-based Koreans. Koreans were also prohibited from entering their family registers in Japan and had to return to their Korean hometown whenever changes to this document were required.

Regardless of whether they planned to remain in Japan, as most eventually did, or return to Korea, for many, the most attractive short-term option was to enroll their children in the ethnic schools. Yet, this decision made little sense to American occupation administrators who saw the most efficient means of encouraging Korean assimilation (or repatriation) to be their studying alongside their Japanese counterparts. SCAP refused to see the Korean efforts for what they were—attempts to protect the aspiration that their children develop or maintain a sense of identity as Koreans. Rather, SCAP interpreted them as efforts to encourage a larger cause—international communist revolution. Ryan joined other American officials in tying the “riots” to the upcoming elections scheduled for May 10 in southern Korea. She wrote that SCAP had even drawn up evacuation plans should Korean actions threaten American residents.

“The Korean elections certainly have been watched from here with much interest for a long time. The outbreak has been confined to the Communists and the Koreans, but for a time there was a great fear that the attack would be made on Americans and we were ready for it. Right after the first of the year hush-hush arrangements went on with preparations to evacuate all Americans from Korea if a riot broke out prior to the elections. Kobe naturally would be the first haven for them. Ships came over from the States loaded down with food and it was stored here.... A month ago all petroleum products

were cut off so that in case of evacuation there would be nothing left for the Reds to take over. Then Mrs. Keeney and her baby...got out of there the last part of March as did many others. Many ships were out at sea ready to put in at Seoul and other ports in case evacuation became necessary even at the 11th hour.”

She expressed relief that her suspicions this time came to naught: after “the elections have passed that fear is over for the time being at least.”

Ryan’s opinions again reflected those of her peers in Japan, as we see in Douglas Jenkins’ letter to William J. Sebald. Jenkins suggested that Koreans were not especially concerned over the future of their ethnic schools, but saw SCAP’s actions as an opportunity to protest a more important issue, the upcoming elections.

“With the elections in Southern Korea imminent, any clash between Koreans in Japan and the Occupation forces, which could be played up as demonstrating the Occupation supporting the Japanese against the Koreans, would serve as useful propaganda ammunition in Southern Korea, and could also be used throughout the world as a further example of ‘American imperialism.’

The Korean leaders were presented with a ready made cause for mass protest by the closing of Korean schools by the Japanese authorities for the failure of the schools to comply with recently enacted education legislation. No doubt, had this eminently satisfactory cause for protest not come to hand, the leaders would have invented

another to obscure their underlying motive.” [19]

SCAP officials might be excused for considering this possibility. The days leading up to the May 10 elections were filled with violence between left and right-wing factions. The G-II Periodic Reports of April 28, the day Ryan penned her first letter on the Kobe incident, listed the following acts of “civil unrest” in southern Korea. A “mob of unknown size threw a homemade hand grenade into the home of a local election candidate”; the “South Korean Labor Party (SKLP) has issued instructions that all *myŏ’ŏn* (village) offices, police boxes and registration offices must be burned to destroy election records. SKLP has also promised that arms sent by the North Korean Labor Party will be available by 10 May”; and “three members of the local election committee were killed and one seriously injured when attacked by a mob of 20 terrorists armed with spears and shotguns.” This report also carried news of mob attacks on school principals, village heads, leaders of right-wing groups, and police officers. [20] In addition, Violent confrontations on a mass scale also broke out from April 1948 on the island of Cheju that left an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 of the islanders dead, and forced as many as 40,000 people to flee to Japan. [21]

While acts of violence committed by leftists against rightists received much more publicity in the U.S. reports, this bias probably better reflects the conservative tone of the reports than the actual situation. Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC), for example, included in its report similar acts of sabotage and violence that were instigated from both sides. [22] The violence by left-wing groups no doubt also reflected U.S. general oppression of this element from as early as February 1946, when the Military Government passed the Political Party Registration Act (*Chŏ’ngdang tungnok bŏ’p*), a law that Kim Kut’ae compares favorably to the colonial-era Peace Preservation Act.[23] This

oppression, and the fact that the election was limited to southern Korea strengthened the political divide between the two Koreas, led many left-wing groups to boycott them altogether.

Occupation officials interpreted the Korean actions as communist inspired. Koreans on the peninsula addressed the incident from a much different perspective. A CIC report noted that both left- and right-wing Koreans viewed this “oppression of Koreans in Japan” as U.S. backing for a renewal of Japanese expansion in East Asia. It paraphrased one left-wing newspaper article that reported “innocent Koreans [being] oppressed and murdered not only by the Japanese but also by the US Army Forces in Japan.” The report continued: “US leniency toward the Japanese is responsible for the renewal of brutality directed at the Korean people.” The future president of the Republic of Korea (ROK), Syngman Rhee added that Koreans would have no difficulty in choosing sides on this issue. [24]

“Send them all Back to Korea”

Elizabeth Ryan’s solution to the problem—send them all back to Korea, and if they do not want to return have them take out Japanese citizenship—was a simplistic solution to a much more complex problem. Yet, it was one frequently offered by many in the Occupation and Japanese governments. Upon arriving in Kobe, General Robert L. Eichelberger remarked that he wished he “had the *Queen Elizabeth* here to ship the whole lot of them [Koreans] to Korea.”[25] Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru suggested in a letter to Douglas MacArthur that the U.S. administration forcefully return all Koreans who were unable to “contribute to [Japan’s] reconstruction.” MacArthur, sympathized with Yoshida’s general aim to rid Japan of this problem, but was unwilling to force them to do so. He lamented that should he do so they “would have their heads cut off” by the South

Korean government as they were all “North Koreans,” in other words, communists. [26]

MacArthur and Yoshida, 1954

Such suggestions were impractical for a number of reasons. First, the idea that Koreans should “return” to Korea made little sense to this people, many of whom had been born and raised in Japan. The Japan-based Korean population consisted of a large number of first-generation Koreans, but perhaps even more second- and third-generation Koreans. For these latter people Japan was the only “home” they knew. [27] They had little or no knowledge of their ancestral language and culture. Indeed, some who had been raised as Japanese during the prewar and wartime periods did not learn that they were of Korean ancestry until after Korea’s liberation. These deficiencies complicated the efforts of many repatriated Koreans to integrate into Korean society, leading them to once again cross over (now illegally) into Japan. The 1947 Alien Registration Ordinance categorized all Japan-based Koreans as “foreigner” (or alien), even though SCAP expected the people to go to schools of “Japanese nationals.” [28] Feeling unaccepted in both Korean and Japanese culture, the ethnic schools provided Koreans with an opportunity to reorient their children to their ancestral culture.

Ryan and Eichelberger might have recognized that U.S. policy also complicated their return to Korea. Occupation policy severely limited the amount of belongings returnees (both Korean and Japanese) could bring. One provision restricted them to bringing back just up to 1,000 yen in currency, not enough to survive a few weeks much less to restart their lives in a new environment. [29] Additional problems awaited them upon arrival in southern Korea. The war’s end and Korea’s division interrupted economic networks that Japan had nurtured throughout its East Asian Empire. This caused

acute shortages in food, energy, and natural resources in southern Korea, which further curtailed the ability of all Koreans to procure basic living essentials (housing and food), and critically limited their opportunities for employment. U.S. Military Government projections for improvement in these areas remained gloomy over its initial few years of its administration of southern Korea. In addition, Koreans in Japan also received news of political unrest in southern Korea and military confrontation with northern Korea increased that also caused them to think twice before returning to the Korean peninsula. [30]

The Kobe “Riots” and SCAP’s “Reverse Course”

The question foremost on the minds of the Korean protesters—why the Japanese and Occupation administrations decided to close the schools at this particular time—was the question that Elizabeth Ryan and others failed to address in their commentaries. The Korean situation in Japan represents one example where SCAP’s otherwise farsighted decision to funnel its orders through a Japanese administration worked to its disadvantage. Having the Japanese government order the ethnic school to close only rekindled in Korean minds painful memories of Japan’s colonial rule, and the troubles that this regime had inflicted on this people over the past four decades.

The context under which these schools were closed cannot be divorced from other actions then taking place in Japan. From 1947 SCAP initiated what has come to be known as the “reverse course,” the U.S. rolling back occupation policies that promoted democracy and demilitarization in Japan to concentrate efforts on Japan’s economic and political development. These changes were influenced by the Truman Doctrine of March 1947. Truman vowed to “help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their

national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes.” [31] In Japan, the Truman Doctrine was manifested in SCAP’s purging thousands of suspected leftists from positions of influence, and returning purged Japanese to these positions, including a number of Class A war criminals. It also ended plans to dismantle Japanese conglomerates (*zaibatsu*) and initiated discussions urging Japanese rearmament. The fear driving these changes was expressed by Director of the Policy Planning Staff George Kennan, who during a March 1948 visit to Japan questioned whether “Japan’s powers of resistance to Communism could be taken for granted.” [32] As China slipped into communism, the United States came to realize the paramount position that Japan would play in East Asian political affairs. SCAP’s order to the Japanese to close Korean ethnic schools, which it believed served as a breeding ground for communist indoctrination, reflected the spirit of this policy reversal.

The upcoming elections in southern Korea may also have factored in the timing of the schools’ closing. The formation of a democratically elected national assembly, and the anticipated establishment of a Korean government, would offer Japan-based Koreans the opportunity to register as South Korean nationals, which in turn might expedite their repatriation. This scenario was anticipated in the “Staff Study Concerning Koreans in Korea” dated August 16, 1948, one day after the South Korean government was officially inaugurated. This study began by outlining the problem: “There are about 600,000 Koreans in Japan; most of them were born in Korea or in Japan of Korean parents. It is estimated that on a monthly average 650 Koreans enter Japan illegally and that 400 are repatriated or deported to Korea.” It then summarized the efforts that SCAP had made to repatriate Japan-based Koreans:

“SCAP policy toward Koreans in Japan has been twofold: a)

...Koreans have been treated as liberated people and therefore strenuous efforts have been made to repatriate to Korea all Koreans in Japan who wished to return; b) Koreans who voluntarily continued to reside in Japan have been presumptively considered for purposes of treatment as retaining their Japanese nationality and are to be considered until such time as a duly established Korean Government accords them recognition as Korean nationals.”

However, those Koreans who remained in Japan were reluctant to return to Korea due in part to the uncertain prospects in both halves of the peninsula. Yet, at the same time their continued presence in Japan caused a number of problems.

“Politically, Koreans have attempted to establish a large degree of autonomy in Japan. Many of them have tended more and more to participate in communist activity, so that now the League of Koreans Residing in Japan, the principal Korean organization in Japan, is largely dominated by communists. Koreans move illegally between Japan and Korea serve as the link between Japanese communists and those on the continent of Asia—Korean, Chinese, and Russian....Socially the Koreans represent a group which does not readily assimilate to the Japanese both because of the long-standing prejudice of the latter and because of the uneducated and generally underprivileged character of most of the Koreans in Japan....The recent riots in Osaka and Kobe arising from refusal by the Koreans to comply with orders of the

Japanese Government afforded a test of the extent of Korean autonomy in Japan....The riots have of course increased the bitterness between Japanese and Koreans, and it is undeniable that the Japanese would be only too happy to see all Koreans leave Japan."

The study then recommended changes to facilitate Korean repatriation that included increasing the amount of currency with which they could return to 100,000 yen, offering better protection for the part of their estate that exceeded this amount, and providing more convenient transportation and better terms for repatriation. At the same time the Staff Study report acknowledged that these measures alone would be insufficient to encourage complete repatriation. Those who remained in Japan, it advised, should be treated as Japanese nationals even if they registered as Koreans and held dual nationality, or if they reentered Japan after resettling in Korea. The study did little to resolve the problems of Korean residents. With the lone exception of the recommendation to increase the amount of their estate with which Koreans could return to Korea, SCAP made no changes in policy. It washed its hands of the problem, leaving it for South Korean and Japanese governments to negotiate after Japan regained its sovereignty. It would be 1965 before Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) signed both a treaty to normalize their diplomatic relations and an agreement that set conditions for Japan-based Koreans to meet should they seek permanent residence in Japan. Japan-North Korea relations have yet to be normalized.

The shock of the violent response by Koreans to SCAP's order to close the schools initially led to its harsh reaction. Yet, it also awakened SCAP to the need to negotiate with Korean leaders. On May 5, 1948 the *Asahi Shinbun* declared the problem solved when the Osaka and Kobe schools agreed to apply for authorization

(*ninka*) as private schools. [33] The Korean population could only view this result as defeat, a compromise that benefited the Japanese as it created separate Koreans and Japanese schools. Koreans, on the other hand, did gain the right to educate their children in a Korean environment and to offer them a limited Korean ethnic program. But it was also an education that remained subjected to Japanese Ministry of Education directives.

Tension heightened after the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) was established in September 1948. SCAP soon banned display of the DPRK flag at rallies, subjugating violators to arrest and deportation to the ROK. Exactly one year later SCAP began enforcing its April 1949 order for the League of Koreans to disband. On September 9, 500 Japanese police officers locked the doors of the organization's headquarters. The Japanese government again targeted ethnic schools by ordering 350 of them to close. Of those that applied for private school status, only three were accepted. Other schools gained recognition as "miscellaneous schools" that were freed from Japanese influence, and thus able to develop a Korean-based curriculum. [34] A half-century later 90 percent of all Japan-based Korean children received their education as minorities in Japanese schools, many obscured by the use of Japanese names, fluent Japanese language abilities, and familiarity with Japanese culture and mannerisms. [35]

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Notes

[1] Unless specified otherwise, information on the riots is taken from "United States of America vs. Kim Dai Sam [T'aesam] et al: Review of the Staff Judge Advocate," Records of the U.S. Department of State Relating to the Internal Affairs of Japan, 1945-1949, reel 3 (Tokyo: Japanese Diet Library, microfilm).

[2] Pak Kyonsik, *KaihÅ-go zainichi ChÅsenjin undÅshi* [The history of post-liberation Japan-based Korean demonstrations] (Tokyo: San'ichi shoten, 1989), 195.

[3] "Sentences Imposed as Results of Kobe-Osaka Riots in April 1948," Records of the U.S. Department of State Relating to the Internal Affairs of Japan, 1945-1949, reel 3 (Tokyo: Japanese Diet Library, microfilm).

[4] Changsoo Lee, "Koreans Under SVAP: An Era of Unrest and Repression," in *Koreans in Japan: Ethnic Conflict and Accommodation*, edited by Lee and De Vos (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 81.

[5] These letters, which totaled over 1000 pages, were recently discovered in a used bookstore in Nebraska. *Japan Times* staff writer Reiji Yoshida has written a series of articles on them. I am indebted to him for sharing with me

the letters involving the Kobe riots along with other documents that he collected involving the incident. His articles can be found at

[6] This was probably due to her and "the boys" being restricted to camp, as she reported in her April 27, 1948 letter.

[7] Yi WÇ'lsun, "Zainichi ChÅsenjin no minzoku kyÅiku to zainichi ChÅsenjin kyÅiku" (Japan-based Korean ethnic education and Japan-based Korean education) in Pak ChongmyÇ'ng, *Zainichi ChÅsenjin no rekishi to bunka* (Japan-based Korean history and culture) (Tokyo: Akashi shoten, 2006), 221.

[8] "The Constitution of Japan," Japan Institute of Congressional Law, at

[9] Hiromitsu Inokuchi, "Korean Ethnic Schools in Occupied Japan, 1945-52," in *Koreans in Japan: Critical voices from the Margin*, edited by Sonia Ryang (London: Routledge/Curzon, 200), 150.

[10] Both orders were originated by SCAP. Takemae Eiji, *GHQ: The Allied Occupation of Japan and its Legacy*, trans. Robert Ricketts and Sebastian Swann (New York: Continuum, 2001), 462.

[11] *Ibid.*, 450.

[12] In another undated letter Ryan writes that the massive "Korean hunt" was a demonstration to the Russians (who were suspected as "behind all this unrest") to make them, as she put it, "stay out of our play pen here."

[13] For example, Hugh Byas, *Government By Assassination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), 359-360.

[14] Office of Strategic Services, "Aliens in Japan" (June 29, 1945), "Occupation of Japan" United States Planning Documents, 1942-1945, Volume III of set located in the Japanese

National Library, pp. 2, 15.

[15] Letter from Douglass Jenkins to U.S. Political Adviser William Sebald (May 4, 1948). Records of the U.S. Department of State Relating to the Internal Affairs of Japan, 1945-1949, reel 15 (Tokyo: Japanese Diet Library, microfilm).

[16] See William Underwood, "[New Era for Japan-Korea History Issues: Forced Labor Redress Efforts Begin to Bear Fruit](#)," *Japan Focus*.

[17] H. Merrell Benninghoff, "The Political Adviser in Korea (Benninghoff) to the Secretary of State," *Foreign Relations of the United States* VI (September 15, 1945), 1051. This attitude may have been influenced by communications sent by the Japanese to Okinawa, where the occupying army prepared for its new assignment prior to arrival. See Kobayashi Tomoko, "GHQ no zainichi ChÅ[senjin ninshiki ni kan suru ikkÅ[satu]" (One consideration of GHQ's perception of Koreans), *ChÅ[senshi kenkyÅ«kai ronbunshÅ«* 32 (October 1994), 165-192. for a summary of U.S. suspicions of communist influence in southern Korea. Bruce Cumings found little evidence to support the often-heard contention that Soviet or North Korean sources were supplying southern guerrillas. Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 245. He writes that although from around the time of Syngman Rhee's 1948 election southern communists began receiving guidance from North Korean communists, it "cannot be said [they] were mere creatures of Kim Il Sung" (ibid., 218).

[18] For discussion on the smuggling operations see Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "An Act Prejudicial to the Occupation Forces: Migration Controls and Korean Residents in Post-Surrender Japan," *Japan Studies* 24, no. 1 (May 2004): 5-28.

[19] "Letter from Jenkins to Sebald," May 4, 1948. In *Records of the U.S. Department of State Relating to the Internal Affairs of Japan, 1945-1949* (Microfilm, Reel 15, Japan Diet Library). For similar views see "General Dean's Answer to Written Press Questions of May 6, 1948," in ibid.

[20] G-2 Periodic Reports (April 28, 1948).

[21] Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, pp. 220-221.

[22] CIC Reports carried statistics that suggested these acts to have been more balanced than the information included in G-II reports, which did not list right-wing acts against left-wing groups. In its May 16 report it recorded 162 deaths of which 43 were members of left-wing groups, and 59 members of right-wing groups. Counter Intelligence Corps Semi-Monthly Report (May 16, 1948), CIC Pogoso (1945.9 - 1949.1) 3 (Seoul: Hallym University, 1995), 406-407, 424.

[23] Kim Kut'ae, *MigunchÇ'ng Ç'i Hanguk t'ongch'i* (U.S. military administration's rule in Korea) (Seoul: PagyÇ'ngsa, 1992), 151-152. The Peace Preservation Act acted as a model for South Korea's National Security Law that is most frequently applied to anyone who demonstrates sympathy to communism or to North Korea.

[24] Counter Intelligence Corps Semi-Monthly Report (April 23-30, 1948), 15.

[25] Lee, "Koreans Under SCAP, p. 82.

[26] Changsoo Lee, "The Legal Status of Koreans in Japan," in Lee and De Vos, eds., *Koreans in Japan*, p.138.

[27] Richard H. Mitchell quotes Ministry of Justice figures to estimate that in 1950 just under half (49.9 percent) of Japan-based Koreans were second generation in his *The Korean Minority in Japan* (Berkeley: University

of California, 1967), 159.

[28] Lee, “The Legal Status of Koreans in Japan,” p. 138. This was in part a decision based on practicalities. Had SCAP granted Koreans the special status they demanded, they would have been eligible for special food rations and other privileges afforded peoples of United Nations states. The sheer size of the Japan-based Korean population made this option rather impractical. See Mark E. Caprio, “Resident Aliens: Forging the Political Status of Koreans in Occupied Japan.” In Mark E. Caprio and Yoneyuki Sugita, eds. *Democracy in Occupied Japan: The U.S. Occupation and Japanese Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2007), 178-199.

[29] As I describe in “Resident Aliens,” more entrepreneurial returnees were able to circumvent this restriction by exchanging money en route to Korea with Japanese returning to Japan. As we shall see below, even SCAP officials recognized this restriction as a formidable barrier to Korean repatriation.

[30] Bruce Cumings offers a more complete description of this violence. See his two-volume *Origins of the Korean War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, 1990). I reflect on the effect that this violence had on Japan-based Koreans in “Resident Aliens.

[31] Truman delivered this speech before Congress to request \$100 million in aid for

Greece and Turkey. Quoted in Warren I. Cohen, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, Vol. IV: America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945-1999* (Cambridge: UK, Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38-39.

[32] George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1967), Chapter 16. For a summary of this “reverse course” see Mark E. Caprio and Yoneyuki Sugita, “Introduction: The U.S. Occupation of Japan—Innovation, Continuity, and Compromise,” in Caprio and Sugita, eds., *Democracy in Occupied Japan: The U.S. Occupation and Japanese Politics and Society*, pp.12-17.

[33] “Shiritsu de ninka shinsei: ChÅsen gakkÅ mondai wa kaiketsu” (Korean school problem is solved: They will apply for authorization as private schools), *Asahi shinbun* (May 5, 1948). Schools in Tokyo remained open but were absorbed by the Japanese schools system that supplied the schools with Japanese staff and teachers. (Inokuchi, “Korean ethnic schools,” p. 154.

[34] See Inokuchi, “Korean ethnic schools,” p. 153-155.

[35] See Eriko Aoki, “Korean Children, Textbooks, and Educational Practices in Japanese Primary Schools,” in Ryang, *Koreans in Japan*, p. 157.