
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF JEJU ISLAND, 1945-1946

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Introduction

It is only in the last twenty years that the story has begun to be told of the post-World War II experiment on Jeju Island off the southwestern coast of Korea which saw Korean people building local democracy in support of an independent, united Korea. By the late 1940s that effort was defeated by the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), which endeavored to prevent an independent, united Korea from emerging because it would be left-leaning.

The battle continues today. In 2002, as part of its military alliance with the US, the Republic of Korea (ROK) government decided to build a new naval base on Jeju Island. Inhabitants across the island are resisting the erection of the naval base anywhere on Jeju. In 2007, the ROK government and military chose Gangjeong Village in southern Jeju as the location where they would construct the new base. The process was far from democratic and split the village. Many Gangjeong villagers opposed and took up to non-violently defend their community — with their bodies if necessary — from the construction of the naval base.

In the spirit of democracy and independence demonstrated in Korea in the immediate post-World War II period, the resistance to the construction of the new base has the support from many Jeju citizens as well as from progressive organizations on the Korean mainland and around the world.¹ In order to understand the significance of the current struggle, it is helpful to look back to the period from 1945-1946 when people on Jeju Island formed a successful system of governance based on local committees.

¹ Gwisook Gwon, "National and International Protests Challenge Naval Base Construction on Jeju Island, South Korea: Hunger Strike Precipitates a National and International Movement," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 9, no. 33, 2011, <http://japanfocus.org/-Gwisook-Gwon/3589> (accessed November 7, 2011).

Background

Korea had been a single nation for at least 1,000 years with a continuous society, language and political system until divided after World War II. In 1943, a Korean exile publication wrote “Koreans are of an old nation. When the ancestors of northern Europe were wandering in the forests, clad in skins and practicing rites, Koreans had a government of their own and attained a high degree of civilization.”²

Jeju-do is a 700 square mile island 50 miles southwest of the Korean Peninsula. It became part of the Korean nation at least since 1394, when Confucian teachers were sent from the peninsula to educate the sons of Jeju officials so they could compete in the national civil service examination system.³ There was foreign influence on Korean society especially from China, but never long-lasting foreign domination. Koreans had turned back efforts by Japan in 1593 and 1597 to subordinate their country. Korea remained independent despite 500 years of efforts of larger powers to dominate it — until Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 and other powerful nations acquiesced to the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910. Before and during the annexation, there was a continuous struggle for Korean independence. Besides attempting to integrate Korea into its empire, Japan used Jeju Island as an airbase for its bombing of Nanking in 1937 and was going to use it as a major fortress to defend the Japanese home islands from the Allied assault that was expected as Japan began to lose World War II.

After the unconditional surrender of Germany on May 9-10, 1945, the defeat of Japan was anticipated, especially with the buildup by the Soviet Union (USSR) of 1.5 million military personnel readying for the declaration of war on Japan promised by the USSR by early August 1945. The US had dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan by August 9. The USSR declared war on Japan on August 10 and began its offensive on August 11. The surrender of Japan came on August 15, 1945.

The end of World War II was greeted by a majority of people all over northeast Asia with joy and relief. Immediately on both Jeju Island and throughout the Korean peninsula, activists began to plan and organize to replace

Japanese rule and dominance. Groups of local people gathered quietly in most villages and cities of Korea and sought ways to replace the police and pro-Japanese administrators with people who had resisted Japanese rule. With over 60,000 Japanese troops and a Japanese sponsored government still in place on Jeju, people there were very careful. But on Jeju especially, there were many people able to organize.

Long Jeju Tradition of Social Activism

Jeju people have a long tradition of an independent spirit. Japanese rule after 1910 was met with occasional organized opposition. On Jeju in 1926 there were demonstrations against ethnic discrimination by Japanese teachers.⁴ In 1931, there were wide-spread student strikes and protests when school authorities refused to grant diplomas to socialist students.⁵ When female divers went on strike in 1932, socialist, communist and union activists gave them support and assistance.⁶ Organizations developed among dockworkers, farmers, and fisherman with occasional strikes and demonstrations. Many Jeju activists in that period and after organized and taught at night schools for adults and children. The Japanese authorities made every effort to prevent and punish these left-wing activities. Every such action was met with police attacks and arrests. Many of the activists spent time in prison. Some immigrated to Osaka in Japan.

Perhaps 200,000 Jeju people at one time or another moved back and forth between Jeju and Osaka, the foremost industrial city in Asia at the time. There they found jobs and, for some, better education than was allowed in Korea. Frequent ferries, some organized by Jeju transportation cooperatives, carried people to Osaka from eleven ports around Jeju. In Osaka, some Jeju residents were active in organizing labor and Japanese socialist and communist organizations even in leadership positions.⁷

Some 60,000 people returned from Japan to Jeju within a short time of the Japanese surrender in August 1945. The experienced and educated returnees played an important leadership role in the emerging governmental structures on Jeju.

² Quoted in Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War (Volume 1): Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes 1945-1947* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 106.

³ David J. Nemeth, *The architecture of ideology: neo-Confucian imprinting on Cheju Island, Korea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 132.

⁴ Kyengho Son, “The 4.3 Incident: Background, Development, Pacification 1945-1949” (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2008): 63.

⁵ John Merrill, “The Cheju-do Rebellion,” *Journal of Korean Studies*, 2 (1980): 149.

⁶ Son, “The 4.3 Incident”: 65-67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

Towards an Independent Korea

In mid August 1945, local people throughout Korea began to plan a takeover of village and city police and administration functions. As many as 5,000 people gathered in Seoul on August 16 to hear that a Committee for the Preparation for Korean Independence (CPKI) had been formed. Upon hearing this, organizers in Jeju City traveled around the island informing the local organizers of this national event. Local committees began to call themselves branches of the CPKI.⁸

On September 6, the Seoul CPKI held a convention that formed an embryonic national government for Korea which was called the Korean People's Republic (KPR).⁹ When they learned of this new government in formation, many local committees throughout Korea called themselves Peoples Committees (PC) of the KPR. In these early weeks of liberation there was no sense of a division of Korea. The universal goal of the PCs everywhere in Korea was the replacement of Japanese colonialism and the emergence of a Korea independent of foreign interference or dominance. When Soviet troops arrived in Wonsan on August 21, they removed the Japanese administration and accepted the chief of the local Peoples Committee as head of peace preservation in the city.¹⁰

The world learned during the Japanese Surrender Ceremony on September 2 that the surrender of Japanese forces would be to Soviet forces north and to US forces south of the 38th Parallel, but there was no clue at all that Korea could be divided. It was also known since the 1943 Cairo Conference that the Allies were committed to Korean independence. When the Allies inserted into the Cairo Declaration that the independence would be "in due course," Koreans in exile translated those word to mean that independence would be a few days after Japanese surrender.¹¹ The Korean translation was widely distributed in Korea.

8 Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 72-73.

9 Ibid., 84.

10 Ibid., 386.

11 Gregory Henderson, *Korea: The Politics of the Vortex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 125. Also, William Stueck and Boram Yi, "An Alliance Forged in Blood": The American Occupation of Korea, the Korean War, and the US-South Korean Alliance," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33:2 (2010): 186.

US Military Government Arrives, Jeju Democracy Continues

On September 8, twenty-one US warships arrived in Incheon harbor. The US military personnel were there to supervise in the name of the Allies the surrender of the Japanese Governor-General of Korea Abe Nobuyuki and the approximately 600,000 Japanese military and civilian personnel and their equipment and property south of the 38th Parallel. US General John Hodge commanded the US landing. The US party was met by an English-speaking committee of the PRK to welcome it to Korea in the name of the people and the newly emerging government of Korea. General Hodge refused to meet with them. His mission was to head the USAMGIK and he would not accept that there was already a newly forming government of Korea.¹²

The outburst of meetings and organizational activity that followed the Japanese surrender emerged all over Korea as the Soviet troops advanced toward the 38th parallel and when the US accepted the surrender of the Japanese Governor-General on September 12. On September 28, the US Armed Forces in Korea (USAFIK) held a separate surrender of the Japanese troops and civil administration on Jeju. It took the US military until November 18 to evacuate all Japanese military from Jeju.

But the local Jeju People's Committees did not wait that long. They began to take up the many problems caused by the Japanese colonial period, the return from Osaka of many people and the disruption of the economy. Young men were organized into peace preservation squads. An education campaign was launched. Schools were fixed up and 27 new ones began to be built.¹³ Japanese-owned factories on Jeju were reorganized by their workers overseen by the PCs. The Committees had the respect and support of most villagers. Committee members were known in their communities from their long years as schoolteachers, union leaders, as well as their resistance to Japanese abuses or for their organizing work in Japan.

On September 22, the central Jeju-do People's Committee was formed in Jeju City with the head of the Farmers Guild and the Fishermen's Guide as its leaders. When the USAMGIK arrived on Jeju in the second week in November, it found that the Jeju-do People's Committee and all the village and county

12 Gregory Henderson, *Korea: The Politics of the Vortex*, 125-126.

13 Ko Chang Hoon, "Presentation about US Government Responsibility in the Jeju April Third Uprising and Grand Massacre" (paper presented at the Jeju 4.3 Conference, Harvard University, April 24-26, 2003).

People's Committees were functioning successfully as a de facto government with popular support.¹⁴ The USAMGIK did not disturb or challenge this de facto government. This was unusual because the USAMGIK had as its mission to ensure that a right-leaning government hostile to socialism emerged in Korea.¹⁵

For the rest of 1945 and much of 1946, the Jeju PCs cooperated with the USAMGIK and the military government gave support to the PCs. The PCs sponsored an island wide commemoration on March 1, 1946 of the 1919 uprising for Korean Independence without any trouble. Police and constabulary units joined in the celebration. When cholera broke out on the island in June 1946, the USAMGIK gave equipment to the PCs and support to the PC peace protection squads to help contain the epidemic. The PCs collected taxes, ran factories and solved disputes that arose among the people.

The Jeju PCs were demonstrating that Koreans could govern themselves and remain friendly to the US military under the conditions of support from USAMGIK. The popular and participatory form of democracy that was evolving on Jeju was a good example of the steps possible toward a united, independent Korea without need for US or Soviet occupation. The PCs included communists, socialists and activists who had the respect and support of the great majority of Jeju inhabitants. The PC de facto government of Jeju was left-leaning and so were the people of Jeju.¹⁶

End of the Jeju Experiment

But this experiment in Korean democracy and independence took a turn for the worse when the USAMGIK helped Jeju become an autonomous province (rather than to continue as a part of South Jeolla province) on August 1, 1946. With provincial status came a new governmental level above the PC de facto government functioning on Jeju. This was part of the USAMGIK's effort throughout Korea to replace the activist, socialist or communist led PCs that expressed the dominant left-leaning spirit of the Korean people at the time of liberation.

The USAMGIK decided to implement an Interim Legislative Assembly (ILA), only in the US zone, in October 1946. Everywhere else but on Jeju

leftists were prevented as a matter of USAMGIK policy from participating.¹⁷ Many Koreans chose not to participate in what they saw as the beginning of the division of Korea. On Jeju, leftists were allowed to participate, and they won seats in the election to be delegates to the ILA.

After the election, uprisings broke out in protest to the direction in which the USAMGIK was taking the southern zone of Korea. Jeju people did not join these uprisings but in the long run suffered tremendously from the antagonism that was sown by the USAMGIK policy goals. The USAMGIK had as its mission to prevent a Korean government friendly to socialism, communism or leftism in general.¹⁸ That mission required that the left-leaning majority of the Korean people be diverted. Right-wing forces began to emerge when they saw that the USAMGIK was taking a more and more anti-left stance. They now saw there would be a place for right-wing power if the USAMGIK succeeded in achieving its policy mission.

As March 1, 1947 approached, the USAMGIK on Jeju prohibited any meetings or demonstrations to again commemorate the 1919 Korean independence movement against the Japanese. In defiance, meetings were held in schools. When the Jeju police were ordered to break up the meetings, the gatherings soon turned into protests against the south-only ILA and for independence based on the spirit of the March 1, 1919 movement.¹⁹

Six demonstrators were killed that day in Jeju City. A very substantial general strike followed. The USAMGIK brought a right-wing governor, youth groups, mainland police and constabulary forces onto the island. The suppression of the Jeju people began. Within a year there was all-out warfare between the Jeju supporters of a united and independent Korea and the USAMGIK. The tragic result was the cruel death of between 30,000 and 60,000 Jeju people and the continuing division of Korea.²⁰

The USAMGIK accomplished its mission of creating — south of the 38th Parallel — an anti-communist government. The Jeju people were cruelly punished for defending the local democracy and the goal of Korean unity and independence.

14 E. Grant Meade, *American Military Government In Korea* (New York: Kings Crown Press, 1951), 185.

15 Meade, *American Military Government*, 233-234.

16 John Merrill, "The Cheju-do Rebellion," 157.

17 Meade, *American Military Government*, 150-160.

18 *Ibid.*, 165.

19 John Merrill, "The Cheju-do Rebellion," *Journal of Korean Studies*, 2 (1980): 153.

20 Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: The Modern Library, 2010), 121-131.

Conclusion

The Jeju people deserve to have this story told. In 2003, former president of the ROK, Roh Moo Hyun, apologized and accepted ROK government responsibility for the wrongful death of many victims. In January 2005, the ROK government officially declared Jeju an “Island of World Peace.” The people of Jeju also deserve an apology and compensation from the US government for its ultimate responsibility for the punishment that Jeju suffered.

The construction of a new naval base appears to many Jeju people as a violation of the designation of Jeju as an Island of World Peace. The naval base will not enhance the chance of Korean unification or peaceful and friendly relations among the nations of Northeast Asia including China. The fight against the naval base construction is reviving the fighting spirit of the Jeju people, and again puts them in the forefront of seeking a united, democratic and peaceful Korea. **PEAR**

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NORWAY AND THE NEW FACE OF TERROR

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At 3:25 pm on July 22, 2011, the Norwegian capital of Oslo suffered a figurative and literal shock as a huge explosion erupted close to the nation’s parliament building. The first images from the scene showed broken glass, scattered debris and bloody bodies covering the streets. The area hosting many government ministry offices and the prime minister’s personal office was covered in smoke and ash as a car parked close by had exploded. It looked more like a scene from a war-zone than anything one would expect to see in the quiet and peaceful city of Oslo. This would, however, prove to be only the beginning of what would become the most gruesome attack on Norwegian soil since World War II.

Less than two hours later, reports began flooding in about shots being heard on the small island of Utøya, 40-kilometers northwest of Oslo. Still focused on the initial attack in Oslo centrum, people were slow to see any connection with the bombing. As the shooting continued on Utøya, the reality started to slowly sink in. There was a massacre happening on the island at the same time as some 600 people participating in the annual summer camp for the Worker’s Youth League (AUF), the youth wing of the Labor Party. Television viewers would soon see the horrible images of teenagers, some as young as fourteen years old, swimming for their lives and many lying dead in the water surrounding the island. The relative small size of Norway augmented the sense of terror, as “everyone” knew someone on the island. The perpetrator was apprehended about an hour after the first shot had been fired, but unlike other shooting sprees, the terrorist had not attempted to commit suicide. Instead he surrendered quietly with his hands over his head. By that time 69 people had been killed on the island of Utøya. The initial bombing in Oslo had happened on a public holiday and as a result casualties were limited to eight people.¹

¹ “Alt om tragedien” [Everything About the Tragedy], *Aftenposten*, September 21, 2011, <http://www.aftenposten.no/nyheter/iriks/article4181314.ece>. (accessed September 21, 2011).