

In Search of “Silver Rice”: Starvation and Deprivation in World War II-era Japan

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Toward the end of the war in Japan, ordinary people began to describe white rice as “silver rice,” according to the stories of Kiyoko Kagi and Kimi Tatebayashi in *Women Against War*, a compilation of the stories of women who lived during the wartime period. A food that was a common fixture of the Japanese meal had now earned heightened value by those who could remember its texture and flavor, but could not experience the joy of eating it. Deprivation forces one to re-evaluate the things in one’s life. This is especially true in the case of food, which not only provides sustenance for the body, but also a sensual experience that is difficult to describe in biological terms. Perhaps nothing like starvation could make such a bland foodstuff seem so valuable. During World War II, the Japanese government required the populace to mobilize for the sake of the war effort, with the emperor as their beacon light. Notions of the emperor's divinity, as well as national pride bolstered by Japan's growing international prestige, gave militaristic rhetoric heightened priority. As the mobilization of Japanese society reached further into the lives of everyday people, the government gained greater control over food. Historically, governments have restricted the amount of civilian consumption for the sake of the military in times of war, yet historians have written little about the civilian experience of enduring long periods of starvation. This essay seeks to address the dearth of understanding of the visceral experience of deprivation through a case study which assesses how the Japanese government, through its policies and actions, directly contributed to periods of starvation and deprivation amongst the populace. Not only did the government contribute to the starvation of those living on the mainland islands, but they also starved Japanese soldiers and civilians living in the rest of the Japanese Empire, as well as the native populations of occupied territories in East and Southeast Asia.

The historiography that exists concerning the Japanese Empire's food situation during the war is scattered, as the topic itself interests scholars in/from several fields. Much of the research done on the topic has been handled by historians, cultural anthropologists, economists, and agriculturalists. Up to this point, however, the data collected has been considered the end point. The statistics and aspects of Japan's culinary history and culture are the focal points of this information. Bruce F. Johnston's work on Japan's food economy during the 1940s, written primarily in the 1950s, is best shown in his work *Japanese Food Management in World War II*. The work looks at all aspects of Japan's food situation, from imports and exports, to economic and agricultural practices used throughout the war. This work, culled from large amounts of data of both Japanese and American origin, focuses greatly on statistics, with accompanying descriptions of the policies and programs that caused the statistics. Studies by scholars such as Paul Kratoska and Pierre van der Eng have applied a similar methodology to Southeast Asia, especially during Japan's occupation of the area. A criticism commonly levied at works such as these is that the data predisposes one to view the situation from a top-down perspective, which does not emphasize the agency of the people outside of the government.¹ For example, farmers were able to circumvent the rationing system through hoarding and by sending family members to work in labor-intensive jobs; this showed their desire to survive, despite government directives, and is the human face behind the statistics. These actions are not mentioned in detail in works such as Johnston's. This detached approach causes the human element to be lost from the story.

The human element is seen slightly more in the work of cultural anthropologists and historians. One monograph by Katarzyna J. Cwierka, entitled *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power, and National Identity*, evaluates the national identity the Japanese associated with their food, and notes the change over time that these constructs

¹ R.P. Dore, Review of *Japanese Food Management in World War II*, by Bruce Johnston, *International Affairs*, July, 1954, 394; Alan K. Lathrop, Review of *Food Supplies and the Japanese Occupation in South-East Asia*, ed. Paul H. Kratoska, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (Sept. 1999), 356.

experience. The book shows how Western and Chinese culinary influences during the late 19th century changed Japan's national cuisine. Other works, such as Naomichi Ishige's *The History and Culture of Japanese Food*, and Michael Ashkenazi and Jeanne Jacob's *The Essence of Japanese Cuisine*, discussed the food culture in Japan. All of these works, while more humanistic in nature, look at groups of people and extrapolate cultural experience from group experience. When looking at "culture," these scholars are viewing people in groups, as opposed to analyzing individual social experiences. This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature by focussing on the visceral experience of starvation during wartime Japan. The experiences of starvation, juxtaposed to the cultural lifeways of the population before the war, and using the statistical and factual data as a backdrop can bring out a more complete story. This approach is both valuable and original. By looking at starvation from this angle, we can see beyond the data to the lived experience.

The existing historiography does not adequately assess the scope of the Japanese government's role in allowing people to starve. The government's programs on food and food prices worsened the starvation crisis faced by the populace. Though the government needed to set limits on food prices and consumption during the wartime period, their policies were ineffective in combating the negative consequences that resulted. Imperial Ordinance 703, which came into effect on September 19, 1939, froze the prices of produce, including foods that were not perishable. These prices were frozen to the levels of September 18, the previous day.² By doing this, the government intended to keep the prices controlled. However, price-freezing favored the sellers who charged higher prices at the time of the law's passage. The system also kept in place prices that were raised due to seasonality of the product, as well as price lag due to production issues at the time.³ Before the government managed to freeze the price of perishable food items, however, the prices for these items became inflated. Fruit and vegetable prices rose by 87%,

² Office of Strategic Services, *Civil Affairs Guide: Price Control and Rationing of Food in Japan* (Washington, 1945), Appendix A, 1, Reel 6.

³ Office of Strategic Services, *Civil Affairs Guide*, 1945.

while the price of seafood increased by 107%.⁴ These products, despite not being as important as rice in the Japanese diet, were still commonly consumed. Due to the fact that buyers were charged different prices under the price freeze system, the government found enforcement difficult. Policies such as these not only alluded to the troubles that would continue to face the Japanese populace during the war, but also showed the government's lack of ability or motivation to protect the citizens.

However, these troubles were best signified by the rationing system put in place by the Japanese government. Rice supplies came under government control in 1939, while rationing of consumer goods began on a local basis in 1940. By 1942, rice, wheat, barley, and rye were monopolized by the government. These grains constituted a significant portion of what were considered to be the staple foods of the country. Surpluses of these foods needed to be delivered to the government, where they were doled out first to the military, then sold back to local corporations.⁵ The rationing system relied on several factors to determine how much rice, the main staple, each family would receive. Family rations were dependent upon size, gender make up, the occupations of the family members, and any births, marriages, and deaths in the family. Older people, up to the age of 60, received higher rations. Jobs at this time were classified based on the intensity of the labor involved. Heavier labor created a need for more calories, which convinced the government to increase the rations for those who worked in these jobs.⁶ Men in the same job classification as women were given a larger ration, as well. Larger families received larger rations. The government attempted to maintain the pre-war level of food consumption in the ration. However, by July 1945, the caloric intake for the staples ration had

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*, 31.

⁶ United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *The Effects of Bombing on Health and Medical Services in Japan* (Washington: Manpower, Medical Division, 1947), 40.

been cut by 20%, which took the daily calories ingested down from 2,270 to 1,816.⁷

When determining the size of each family's ration, the government relied upon census data collected by neighborhood associations called *tonari-gumi*. The *tonari-gumi* not only collected this data, but also stored and delivered government rations, established communal kitchens, spied on members of the community, trained in firefighting to combat American fire bombing missions, and were given the task of being Japan's last line of defense in case of a foreign invasion of the home islands. As the *tonari-gumi* consisted of nine households, they tended to want to associate with people of their own economic status and belief systems.⁸ This made dealing with the *tonari-gumi* a necessary, yet unpleasant experience for those who did not share their positions. In her diary, Aiko Takahashi wrote:

Whether it's rice, miso, soy sauce, fish, or meat, the distribution center people bow deeply and say unnecessarily flattering things to you. So what about that? Although we talk about "distributed goods," they certainly are not free. We pay money and buy these goods, but exchanges are not possible, and the distribution center personnel act as though they're doing this as charity, and as a result conversations with them are most unpleasant.⁹

However, relying on the *tonari-gumi* allowed clever citizens to exploit loopholes in the ration system. Deaths of family members were not reported to the *tonari-gumi*. By this means, the families could collect the additional ration of a person who was no longer alive.¹⁰

⁷ Office of Strategic Services, *Civil Affairs Guide*, 43-44.

⁸ Samuel Hideo Yamashita, *Leaves from an Autumn of Emergencies* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, c2005), 16- 17.

⁹ *Ibid*, 171.

¹⁰ Office of Strategic Services, *Civil Affairs Guide*, 38.

workers who held desk jobs claimed to be undertaking heavy labor, in an attempt to collect on the larger ration enjoyed by those who in manual occupations. Tricking the government like this put a greater strain upon rice surpluses than necessary. Issues concerning the work ration also emerged. Before the war effort took a turn for the worse, the ration allocated to workers was distributed to their homes. As people became more desperate to supplement their dwindling rations, they began to skip work to either steal food or visit the black market.¹¹ By 1943, male workers were absent for an average of 7.2% of their yearly work time, while women were absent for 9% of their work time.¹² To combat this, the government adjusted the staple ration for workers. Laborers in the shipbuilding industry, for example, received an extra allocation of 140 grams until June 1944. This allocation increased between 60 and 170 grams, depending on the intensity of the labor. The importance of work, however, still could not compete with the need to provide food for themselves and their families; especially as the staple ration for the average citizen had declined throughout the wartime period.

As the war continued, however, the staple ration began to decrease. This has been previously noted in the 20% caloric drop from the pre-war level. The decrease may be attributed to the difficulties in transporting food surpluses from the rest of Asia to the mainland. The Japanese government's reliance on imports, along with the increasingly effective Allied blockades, created a deficiency in the amount of food available to the citizens.¹³ The total rice imports between November 1939 and October 1940 came to 1,675,000 tons, while those between November 1944 and October 1945 amounted to 236,000.¹⁴ The lack of imports forced the government to cut back on supplies sent to restaurants and shops,

¹¹ United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Effects of Bombing*, 19.

¹² United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Effects of Bombing* 73.

¹³ Bruce F. Johnston, *Japanese Food Management in World War II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1953), 136.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 136.

severely harming Japan's food industry. Hiroyo Arakawa, the wife of a baker living in Tokyo, describes her town as one rife with activity, with many food shops before the deterioration of war situation.¹⁵ As supplies began to dwindle, the bakery's business model was forced to change. Arakawa wrote:

For a while we had a supply of Shanghai eggs. They were powdered eggs. You added water and mixed it in the blending machine, but they didn't get frothy like real eggs, and the *kasutera* wouldn't rise either. Eventually, even they became unavailable, so we had to change our business to sandwiches. There was no more sugar. We'd buy ten loaves of bread, slice them as thin as possible, fill them with whale ham. There wasn't any real pork ham anymore. We knew someone who worked at a marine-products lab. Those bureaucrats there had unlimited butter. We got butter from them.¹⁶

Eventually, the family had to turn over all metal products to the military, give up their business, and flee the city to escape American bombing. This example was not unique. Many people had to either change or abandon their businesses. All restaurants were effectively shut down by 1944, due to the scarcity of produce, and also because the government considered restaurants a luxury. Fukumi Watanabe of Fukuoka mused: "there was nothing to be sold in confectioneries, rice cake shops, or vegetable shops. The colors disappeared from towns."¹⁷ many of the men who worked in the food industry were

¹⁵ Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook, *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: New Press, 1992), 177-178.

¹⁶ Cook and Cook, *Japan at War*, 1992, 180. *Kasutera* is a Japanese sponge cake, similar to cakes seen in Portugal, where the name "castella" is derived. Made with flour, eggs, syrup, and sugar.

¹⁷ Frank Gibney, ed., *Senso: the Japanese Remember the Pacific War* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 199-200.

drafted either into the military or into industrial factories, in an attempt to speed up production of war materials. The belief that Japan could still win the war with the spirit of every Japanese subject still existed. However, without proper nutrition, caused by the government's ever-changing, decreasing ration, this spirit was weakening along with their bodies.

The decreasing supply of rice, fruits, and vegetables made it necessary to replace these items with other foods. Wheat, barley, potatoes, soybeans, and coarse grains were all used throughout the war to replace the rice ration.¹⁸ These foods, however, were not always put into the ration based on caloric value, and each provided different amounts of nutrients. While the soybeans, for example, contained more protein than rice, the amount of carbohydrates and calories provided were significantly less.¹⁹ This meant that the government was not providing the populace with enough energy to perform their daily tasks. Tsunejiro Tamura of Kyoto wrote: "because my body is not getting enough nutrients, I tire easily. Most of my countrymen are going through the same thing."²⁰ This encouraged people to try to supplement their rations. This worked against the government's desire to stockpile as much food as possible for the military. The government policies of keeping down the level of food consumption did not work as desperate people found ways to subvert the government policies.

. As the demand for consumer goods increased in contrast to the decreasing supply, the black market became the place to buy goods that had disappeared from Japanese homes. Despite the fact that the police strictly enforced government regulations against illegal transactions and distribution of food, the black marketeers never sold in the same place for too long, and, at times, even had connections with the police. Food that had just been harvested ended up on the

¹⁸ Johnston, *Japanese Food Management*, 1953, 156.

¹⁹ Naval Medical Research Institute, *Far Eastern Nutritional Relief, Japanese Culture* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Navy Dept., 1944), 15.

²⁰ Yamashita, *Leaves from an Autumn*, 2005, 85.

black market in large quantities. By allowing this to happen, the government did not show enough motivation to place stronger protections around these resources. The police had more luck catching those who bought and stole food off of the black market. Those who were caught buying from the black market would be jailed for two to three days.²¹ For a while the social stigma of buying off the black market prevented people from engaging in this kinds of activities; but overtime the the stigma dissipated. The story of Hideshiro Kameo, a professor of German at Tokyo Higher School, and his wife demonstrates the consequences of following the government's rationing program. Professor Kameo instructed his wife not to buy anything from the black market, and only take rationed items. Over time, the Kameos became malnourished and bedridden. The professor and his wife eventually died of malnutrition.²² Had his wife bought products off of the black market, their chances of survival may have increased.

Tsunejiro Tamura, a retired billiard parlor owner living in Kyoto, frequently discussed the prices of black market products in his diary. In a July 16 entry, Tamura noted the disparity between public, official black market, and black market prices. In one example, Tamura showed that 1.6 ounces of sugar was sold at a public price of 45 yen, while the official black market price was 13 yen, and the actual selling price on the black market was 17 yen.²³ The desire of the black marketeers to make a profit caused them to cheat the populace of much needed food, while the police were unable to completely stop the markets that had already cropped up. Even local institutions, such as the electric company, became involved in the black market.

Kiyoko Kagi, a young adult at the end of the war, lived in a world where the black market had become a prominent fixture of society. In her story, she noted how well off the black marketeers

²¹ Richard L. Gage, trans., *Women Against War* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1986), 103.

²² Gibney, ed. *Senso*, 2007.

²³ Yamashita, *Leaves from an Autumn*, 2005.

were, and lamented the allure of such a world to the old and young alike.²⁴ Stealing and selling were par for the course, and even children became black market dealers. Kagi wrote: “it was like a festival, some people bargaining furiously, others buying as much as they could carry.”²⁵ Despite these criticisms, the black market managed to keep many civilians from starving. When discussing the issue of stamping out the black market with the American officials during the occupation period, Tokyo's chief of police stated, as he looked out the window at a crowded street: “there are a lot of people out there. And they're all alive, too. Well, if they hadn't been getting a little something from the black market, there wouldn't be many of them alive.”²⁶ The survival of these people, thanks in part to the black market, is a testimony to the resilience of people, proof of the desperate situation and the government's inability to fully provide for the population. Though they survived, they were extremely malnourished.

The declining nutritional value of the Japanese diet during the war could be attributed to a few factors. The first of these was the lack of rice surpluses needed to maintain the staple foods ration. As mentioned above, Japan built up surpluses with crops grown locally, as well as imports from Korea, Manchuria, and areas in Southeast Asia. Though the amount of rice yields per-acre of farmland remained relatively unchanged during the war, the increasing needs of the military, the lack of workers able to do agricultural jobs, and the inability to bring rice imports in due to interference from the Allied forces hampered the ability to feed the populace. Rice was replaced in the ration with wheat, barley, soybeans, potatoes, and rye. The nutritional makeup of these foods varied, and they each provide a different amount of calories. The disappearance of fish, fruits, and vegetables caused the levels of protein, vitamin C, and other nutrients to sharply decline. Nurses working at Aiiku Hospital in Tokyo in June 1944, for example, ate 54.1 grams of protein and 1,475

²⁴ Gage, trans. *Women Against War*, 1986, 103-104.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 104.

²⁶ Johnston, *Japanese Food Management*, 1953, 163.

calories in a day, which constituted only 72% and 67% of the intake the Institute for Nutrition recommended, respectively.²⁷ This, in turn, negatively affected the immune system, which could help to explain the general increase in cases of diseases such as dysentery, tuberculosis, beriberi, gastrointestinal disease, and typhoid fever. Children throughout the country were getting shorter and weighing less, compared to children their age back in the early 1930s.

The declining health of children population throughout the country was caused by several factors. One very obvious cause was the lack of nourishment these children were receiving. Ichiro Manabe, a primary school student during the last years of the war, mentioned rice gruel several times throughout his diary as the meal of the day. On July 17, less than a month before the emperor read his Imperial Rescript, signifying Japan's surrender to the Allies, his gruel contained "tofu, wheat gluten, pumpkin squash, and eggplant."²⁸ The next day, however, the same gruel, which Manabe described as "dry and tasteless," contained just a portion of wheat gluten and some seaweed.²⁹ Though this meal included a small slice of salmon and some pickled radish, the amount of nutrients provided in these portions was probably negligible. A student at another school named Shoji Takezawa, had a similar experience at the end of the war. Takezawa reminisced:

They were listening to the radio. It was the Emperor's broadcast. Perhaps because I started listening partway through, it was hard for me to hear his voice. To be truthful, his voice sounded as weak as I felt. I wondered if the Emperor, like us, hadn't yet eaten his lunch. This thought made me realize how hungry I was, and it made me want to eat

²⁷ United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Effects of Bombing on Health*, 1947, 74.

²⁸ Yamashita, *Leaves from an Autumn*, 2005, 237.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 237.

pumpkins, potatoes, and sweet-potato-flour cakes all the more.³⁰

Along with the Japanese government, the American government, through their military maneuvers, contributed to the starvation experienced by the Japanese populace. These maneuvers were not only directed at the main islands themselves, but also the seas surrounding Japan, as well as the channels that connected all of Asia. The decreasing amounts of imported materials coming in from the rest of Japan's empire to the mainland represented the tides of the conflict turning, showing the advantage held by the Allied forces. Food that was mostly imported from other areas suffered the greatest decline. Sugar, for example, was produced and imported from areas far away from the large cities. Between 1930 and 1934, Japan, including the Ryūkyū Islands to the south, produced around 110,000 tons of sugar annually.³¹ This made up only 10% of the country's annual consumption, while imports from Taiwan and other areas in Asia provided the remaining amount.³² By 1945, production of sugar on the Ryūkyū Islands had fallen off, while Allied forces in the area kept imports from entering the country. Only 132,000 tons were allocated for household, industrial alcohol, and other industrial uses.³³

While blockades were effective in slowly malnourishing the Japanese populace, bombing the country itself was a more direct course of action that ensured more immediate results. The bombing of Japan towards the end of the war mostly occurred in the larger cities and areas with concentrated populations. Fire bombing was particularly effective against the Japanese, due to the combustible materials with which they built their houses and buildings. Bombing attacks by the American forces did not intentionally target food stocks, due to the fact that the storage areas, as well as the

³⁰ Gibney, ed. *Sensō*, 2007. 255.

³¹ Johnston. *Japanese Food Management*, 1953.42.

³² *Ibid*, 42.

³³ *Ibid*, 160.

manufacturing buildings were dispersed throughout the country. As food production had already fallen off, the bombing of many areas of food production and distribution was merely another factor that contributed to the decline of Japan's food economy. Despite the fact that food stocks were not intentionally targeted by the American forces, food damage was part of the spill-over damage attributed to these bombs. By the end of the war, the Japanese had lost 221,591 metric tons of food due to the bombs, withholding the indeterminate amount that had been lost in homes and in transit.³⁴

Though the civilians suffered immensely under these conditions, the war effort placed the greatest emphasis on the needs of the soldiers and the military. The demanding, abusive nature of life in the Japanese military during World War II allowed for very few escapes from this life. The indoctrination within Japan's military life required, according to higher ranking officials, regular violence to keep the ideals of the army firmly in place. A soldier was taught to only think of defeating the enemy, or, when that possibility did not exist, to throw himself into the sea for the sake of the Japanese race. Food, in some ways, served as a way for the soldiers to gain revenge upon the establishment that so often beat them down, and to remove themselves from their situations. One story, told by Michi Fukuda, showed the lengths that abused soldiers would go to, in hopes of getting revenge upon their superior officers, while hoping to dissipate some of their pent up rage. Fukuda watched one day as a fellow soldier was abused and humiliated by his superior officers. Fukuda then wrote:

The next morning I saw the first-year soldier, who was on kitchen duty, intently scratching his head so that his dandruff flakes would land in the miso soup and rice on the tray. Offering them “dandruff rice” seemed to be the customary way to even the score with the commanding officer and the squad leaders. The night of our surrender, I witnessed many soldiers beating up several of the mean-spirited officers, who were screaming, “Forgive me, forgive

³⁴ United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *The Effects of Bombing on Health*, 1947, 741

me"! This scene was also so fierce that I wanted to cover my eyes.³⁵

Despite the government's inaction when dealing with the mistreatment of their soldiers, they very rarely, during the early and middle parts of the war, starved to the extent that their families and friends back on the mainland did later on. Rations for soldiers were noticeably higher than those of average citizens, as the Japanese government divided materials up with a bias towards the military. This policy was not a new one. Even in the early years of the twentieth century, as Japan's military power began to greatly increase, emphasis was placed on the quality of food provided to soldiers. Dishes such as curry rice, beef stew, fried biscuits, and *oyakodon* were popular with the navy by 1935.³⁶ Katarzyna Cwiertka noted the large amount of protein available in these dishes, which turned itself into necessary energy.³⁷ However, as mentioned throughout this work, the declining ability of the government to protect the food economy also caused increasing rates of starvation amongst the soldiers of the Japanese army.

With the war effort dispersed through the whole of Asia, the food situation became a precarious one for the soldiers. They could not expect a stable food distribution system. Because food produced in Japan's various colonies were not only being used for the soldiers but were also being sent to Japan to feed the population at home. Food took on a new meaning when it became scarce. When describing his forced landing on the island of Biak, off the northeast coast of New Guinea, to his fellow soldiers, Yasuo Itabashi wrote:

So I described how the brave warriors of Biari Island
had three *kanpan* a day as their main food and a rice

³⁵ Gibney, ed. *Senso*, 2007, 41-42.

³⁶ Literally "parent and child bowl." Refers to the use of both simmered chicken and egg as the main ingredients. Katarzyna Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power, and National Identity*. London: Reaktion Books, 2006, 73-74.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 74.

allotment of one rice ball for dinner. When I talked about accepting that one rice ball, filling our canteens with the water that dripped into our bunker, and men going off on raids every night, the brave warriors, all of them combat veterans, sniffed and blinked through tears.³⁸

Starvation, in this way, became a medium to express the duty and fighting spirit of the Japanese soldier. To bring about the nation's ultimate victory, all Japanese needed to work and suffer to ensure that they had enough spirit to continue the fight. Itabashi, an example of a soldier who subscribed to the military's nationalistic train of thought, used food to emphasize his struggle, while showing how even the average foot soldier could contribute to the final victory. At the same time, food, in a poetic and decidedly Japanese way, could be used when discussing military affairs such as promotions. Hidehachi Nishimura, when confronted by an older person concerning his lack of motivation to gain stars, which symbolized advancement in rank, explained himself thus:

...If someone else was kind enough to purchase the o-shiruko, brought it to me, and asked me to drink it, then I would be happy [to] do so. Stars are something I simply cannot care less about, exactly like the o-shiruko when I do not care to have it. Neither do I wish to earn one by lowering myself and working hard obsequiously. Just being a private first-class is enough for me. Promotions will not make me happy, and I would not become overly excited even if my pay went up by a yen or two. If

³⁸ Yamashita, *Leaves from an Autumn*, 2005., 75. *Kanpan* are hard biscuits that were staples of the Japanese military diet. They became popular with civilians due to, according to Cwiertka, the popularity of the military, the lack of cooking fuel and equipment, and their higher caloric value than rice (Cwiertka 127-128).

they actually offered to give me a raise, however, that would be no problem and I would gladly take it.³⁹

The sustenance of the Japanese Empire, which reached into Southeast Asia, and included Korea, Taiwan, Manchuria, and areas of Northern China, required not only the presence of the Japanese military, but also that of Japanese citizens. These citizens, in some cases colonists, were necessary not only to uphold the values held in the rhetoric of Japan's policy of creating a Greater East Asia Co-Prospersity Sphere, but also to redirect foreign goods towards Japan. The enthusiasm created by Japan's access to new territory convinced many citizens to leave the mainland to colonize the rest of Asia. This effective government campaign motivated the citizens to attempt to contribute to this "just" cause. Food became an important factor in convincing these citizens to participate. Yoshie Fukushima, the wife of a businessman in Manchuria, reaped the benefits of Japan's strength in the area. The abundance of food was a beacon of hope. Fukushima wrote: "we had all the food we wanted---cans of bamboo shoots, dried tofu without limit, and shiitake and other mushrooms. Whenever people came, I fed them."⁴⁰ Food, to her, was a motivating factor in her decision to migrate. In the same passage, she recalled: "in Japan there was so little already. Clothing was rationed and food had begun to disappear. Simply having so much food made Manchuria attractive."⁴¹

However, the war effort started to take its toll on the size of the Empire. Allied military victories chipped away at the size of the empire. The arrival of Allied forces in these areas frequently meant, for the Japanese abroad, death or disgrace in escape. While fleeing the Allied forces, the government did not provide completely secure passage. Families and soldiers alike fled from Manchuria with the

³⁹ Joseph L. Quinn; Midori Yamanouchi, trans. *In the Far Away Mountains and Rivers*. Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2005. *O-shiruko* is a sweet soup or porridge made from *azuki* (red) beans.

⁴⁰ Cook and Cook. *Japan at War*, 1992., 60.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 60.

Russians nipping at their heels, while the Japanese in Southeast Asia suffered in the jungles, with the approach of the Americans constantly at the forefront of their minds. With food supplies compromised, the Japanese soldiers and citizens suffered from similar experiences of starvation. A lack of nutrition led to illness and death. This starvation, coupled with the bleak situation staring them in the eyes, brought forth, at times, the darkest acts of desperation a human being can commit and bear witness to.

For soldiers, the food situation during the high point of Japan's dominance of Asia was relatively stable. In many cases, such as those of Burma and Malaya, the high ranking officials of the government and the military impressed upon the soldiers a policy of self-sufficiency. In turn, the soldiers introduced this concept to the native populations of the area. By enacting such a policy, the Japanese hoped to avoid creating massive food shortages in the mainland or other areas. Cutting off one's dependency upon other areas created a sense of achievement and strength. One example of this, recollected by Isawo Aihara, a sergeant stationed in Burma, describes the process of diverting a channel of a river to the Japanese base, which provided the soldiers with fish, an extremely important commodity, due to the lack of other sources of protein in the area. The fish collected amounted to about one bucketful, which was then salted and dried.⁴² Seriyō Yamashita, a captain stationed in another area, noted an incident that shows the Japanese soldiers responding to the policies of self-sufficiency placed upon them. Yamashita wrote:

At that time only half of the troops had arrived due to the long and tedious trip from Thailand, so priority was given to transportation of troops. Supplies had not accumulated, so we were faced with a shortage of food. Each department was allocated a part of the nearby mountains where we dug deep in the earth to get yams. This was quite different from my war

⁴² Kazuo Tamayama and John Nunneley, trans. *Tales by Japanese Soldiers of the Burma Campaign, 1942-1945*. London: Cassell, 2000., 101.

experience in China and I felt that I might not come home alive.⁴³

This policy could not, however, stop the arrival of Allied forces in Japanese territory, as they beat the Japanese out of the sea and onto land. Separated not only from their new homes, but also their homes in Japan, the civilians and soldiers living abroad shared similar experiences. Deprivation bound people together. The story of Sakie Maki, a colonist who followed her husband to Manchuria in March 1944 to live on an agricultural commune, merely exemplified the stories that were becoming more common throughout the empire. Though their lives were quiet and happy for over a year, the arrival of the Russians in August 1945 shattered this life. With only a week's worth of food, Maki left her commune, hoping to meet up with other Japanese. However, the journey was extremely difficult, cutting into her food supplies. "Sipping dew from the grass and gnawing raw potatoes, we longed for our homes as we watched smoke floating upward from the chimneys of distant houses," Maki wrote.⁴⁴ However, even this small amount of nourishment ran out. Maki recollected:

We tied strips of cloth to one another so that no one would get lost as we traveled through the night. All we had to eat were wild chives and grape leaves. With no water at all, we were sometimes reduced to drinking our own urine... And somehow, in all this wandering, I ended up alone, with nothing to eat, and only the tattered clothes I had on my back.⁴⁵

Maki's experience was common throughout the Japanese Empire during this time. The trials of Sueno Ōkita, a civilian who left Japan with her husband for the Philippines in 1938, mirrored

⁴³ *Ibid*, 188.

⁴⁴ Gage, *Women Against War*, 1986. P. 35.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 37.

those of Sakie Maki in some ways. The early tensions between Japan and the Philippines, however, made Ōkita's situation hazier. In 1941, Ōkita and her family were kidnapped by Filipino soldiers and she was separated from her husband. She and her children were kept in a small room in a primary school, while each person was provided "two or three tablespoons of food, usually soybeans."⁴⁶ Despite being rescued by Japanese forces a short time after her family's capture, the American arrival in 1944 forced the family to move away from the coast and close to the city of Davao. The strength of the American forces, however, necessitated a move to the mountains, which created more pronounced shortages of food. With her husband ill and weak, Ōkita, out of desperation, sought food from any source. Ōkita wrote:

Weeping all the while and praying that what I did would enable us to stay alive a bit longer, I took things from the bodies of the four or five Japanese soldiers I found lying there. From the shoes of one I found an obviously treasured handful of uncooked rice. In the pocket of another, wrapped in a piece of newspaper, I found some salt. Knowing I could be shot at any moment, and aware of the folly of being killed without taking back to my children and husband the salt for which I was risking my life, I started hurrying back.⁴⁷

The worsening situations of the soldiers stationed throughout the Japanese Empire forced them to suffer through similar tribulations. The story Yasuo Itabashi related to his fellow soldiers showed deprivation on the battlefield. However, it did not illustrate the pure desperation that darkened the thoughts of soldiers who were battling the foreign enemy and their own bodies. Even treading dangerously close to enemy lines became worth the effort for some food. Tamotsu Ogawa, a soldier stationed on New Britain

⁴⁶ Ibid, 47.

⁴⁷ Gage, trans. *Women Against War*, 1986, 35, 51.

in Papua New Guinea working as an orderly, recollected: “At night, men often disappeared. They went right over to the enemy camp to swipe some food. Mainly what they got was canned goods, but they couldn't tell what they were taking because the labels were in English. They brought back all kinds of stuff. Facing starvation, one could do anything.”⁴⁸

These words eerily reflect the plight of the Japanese soldiers. In the life and death situation morality took a backseat to their human survival instincts. Stealing and betrayal became part of one's natural set of skills. Of his experiences in the Philippines, Shinji Matsuu recalled certain dark memories. “The few Japanese soldiers who survived should have helped each other out. Instead there were those who killed themselves in suicidal explosions, those who killed their fellow men for their food. Military police would take away soldiers trying to escape, accuse them of holding antiwar sentiments, and confiscate their food.”⁴⁹ This survival instinct was taken to a further extreme, as there were even cases of cannibalism. Even allowing the native populations to perish before the military was seen as a viable way of thinking. A soldier stationed on Timor recalled such thoughts:

But by the end of 1944 the supply of goods from Java was cut off and food provisions became severely reduced. The military considered that we could not starve before the islanders. The army had to survive even if it meant requisitioning all available goods. Water buffalo needed for cultivating the fields were bought up with unusable military scrip. We also ate hearts of palm and trunks of papaya, valuable assets to the inhabitants.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Cook and Cook. *Japan at War*, 1992, 280.

⁴⁹ Gibney, ed. *Senso*, 2007, . 153.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 163.

The desire on the part of the high ranking military officers to keep themselves fed also jeopardized the well-being of their soldiers. In some cases, their hoarding of food killed some of the men who served under them. Yumio Kokubo recalled: "I reached brigade headquarters. There they had food---plenty of it. It shocked me to see the well-fed men of the headquarter units line up like ants and carry off provisions into the distance. At the front we had not been sent even a grain of unhulled rice."⁵¹ These actions also directly affected those living under Japanese rule.

The diversion of material goods away from the native populations of Japan's colonies was frequent. This government policy led to the starvation of these people. As mentioned above in Yasuo Itabashi's story, the growing desperation of the Japanese military's situation led to larger quantities of goods being stocked up by them, with almost none of it going to the native population. Though the military stressed a policy of self-sufficiency to its colonies, the home islands relied on the goods produced from these colonies to build up surpluses, while also providing foods that were not available within Japan. The need for greater amounts of products necessitated a policy which looked past not only the mainland Japan but also Korea, and Taiwan. This meant turning towards Southeast Asia.

Rice, for example, is grown in Japan, and serves as the staple food in the Japanese diet. However, rice imports were necessary to support the surplus available to the government; especially after 1942's disastrous harvest. Korea and Taiwan's similarly bad harvests in 1939 convinced the government of Southeast Asia's potential market power. Burma, which did not come under the control of the Japanese until 1942, had previously already begun exporting more of its rice crop to Japan. As the Japanese market had noticeably increased, it became obvious that their presence in Southeast Asia was being felt. Between 1939 and 1940, Burma exported 126,000 tons of rice to Japan. This number was increased to 551,000 the following year.⁵² Almost all of Thailand's rice exports from 1942 to

⁵¹ Ibid, 153.

⁵² Paul H. Kratoska, "The Impact of the Second World War on Commercial Rice Production in Mainland South-East Asia," in *Food Supplies*

1945 went to Japan.⁵³ Despite the new outlook on the Southeast Asia market, Japan still imported hundreds of thousands of tons of rice from Korea and Taiwan.⁵⁴

With the war, however, came the consequences of Japan's economic policies. Extreme oversights by Japan's economic leaders resulted in only a modest merchant shipping program.⁵⁵ Damage done by American ships, between December 1941 and July 1945, resulted in the loss of 2,180 ships, along with 7,590,000 tons of product.⁵⁶ Intended or not, the Japanese relied even further upon their colonial holdings for food. This resulted in the abuse and malnutrition of these peoples. The use of propaganda and coercion on the part of the Japanese created significant changes in the diets and nutritional values of meals in Southeast Asia.

Using food to win the hearts and minds of the colonized population can also be viewed as a way of using food as an instrument of coercion. In Korea, for example, loyalty to Japanese was returned with the favor of ration. Cooperation from the local population in the introduction of Shintō in the area was secured by providing food. Of her experience with cooperating with Japanese for rations, Yi Okpun wrote:

Of course we had to go up to the shrine on Namsan. The head of our neighborhood group was Japanese; that's why we had to do everything he said. If we didn't go, we didn't get any food ration... The ceremony took about, let's see, thirty minutes. They pour some water, you clap your hands, then you come

and the Japanese Occupation in South-East Asia, ed. Paul H. Kratoska. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, 17.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 19.

⁵⁴ Johnston, *Japanese Food Management*, 1953,136.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 140.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 141.

down and get the food ration stamps. Later when we changed our name, I just followed whatever my husband said. I didn't care. Just get the food ration card!⁵⁷

This coercion also manifested itself in Japan's agricultural policy towards Southeast Asia. Japan's presence in Malaya, for example, caused the country's exports-based economy to shrink, while also encouraging high levels of inflation. In turn, a system of rationing needed to be established, which included controls on rice, flour, eggs, and sugar.⁵⁸ Between August 1942 and April 1943, the rice allotment given out to the local populace by the Japanese fell from around 6.5 pounds per week to 5.25 per week.⁵⁹ In attempts to invigorate Malaya's food economy, the Japanese sold off empty plots of land to non-Malay people, while also introducing new strains of rice from Formosa, hoping that this would produce a more resilient crop.⁶⁰ The farming community, for whom these changes had a great impact, was less than enthusiastic to follow Japanese policies. As was the case in Burma, farmers declined to harvest unknown crops or adopt their harvesting methods.⁶¹ In a propagandistic move, the government offered prizes to the farmers who produced the greatest yields of rice and fertilizer.⁶² Soldiers would often stand near the

⁵⁷ Hildi Kang. *Under the Black Umbrella: Voices from Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2001., 111.

⁵⁸ Office of Strategic Services Research and Analysis Branch, *Japanese Administration in Malaya*. Washington: Office of Strategic Services, Research and Analysis Branch, 1944, 28-31.

⁵⁹ Paul H. Kratoska, "Malayan Food Shortages and the Kedah Rice Industry," in *Food Supplies and the Japanese Occupation in South-East Asia*, ed. Paul H. Kratoska. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, 105.

⁶⁰ Office of Strategic Services Research and Analysis Branch. *Japanese Administration in Malaya*, 1944, 36.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 46.

⁶² *Ibid*, 37.

plots, serving as an authoritarian symbol. The annual production of rice in Malaya, between the time of Japan's first arrival and the end of the war, fell by almost 100,000 tons.⁶³ This data shows the weakness of the Japanese policies, while also reflecting the unwillingness of the government officials to change them for the better.

The military took a similar approach in Singapore. Stocks of food were quickly bought up by the Japanese, who then instituted a rationing system. The native population saw a similar drop in their rice ration, which went from 12 kilograms per month in 1942 to between four and eight kilograms, depending on one's gender and age, by the end of the war.⁶⁴ The government's self-sufficiency policy also took root in Singapore, where playgrounds and parks became vegetable plots, populated with mostly potatoes and tapioca.⁶⁵ This policy also had the advantage of pushing Japan's concept of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. One propaganda poster of the time shows a group of women of different ethnic groups, and reads “*minna, nakayoku, genkiyoku* (everyone vigorously getting along).”⁶⁶ This cheery image, however, did not reflect the everyday lives of the Singaporeans, who faced astronomical food prices, as well as a burgeoning black market culture. Like the black market in Japan, it became a deeply entrenched symbol of daily shortages, and reflected the government's lack of ability to completely stamp it out. The situation, however, shows the ingenuity of the Singaporeans, who had to create their own substitutes for foods and flavoring agents that had long vanished. “Soy sauce” made from coconut milk, peanuts, potatoes, and starch, and tomato sauce made from sugar,

⁶³ Kratoska, ed. *Food Supplies*, 1998,108.

⁶⁴ Hong Suen Wong. *Wartime Kitchen: Food and Eating in Singapore, 1942-1950*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet and National Museum of Singapore, 2009.10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 21.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 45.

vinegar, tomatoes, and papayas exemplify their ingenuity.⁶⁷ Each and every elements of food, from the bones of meat to the skin of a papaya, was used. The shortages also marked the emergence of feeding centers and street food, commonly sold on the doorsteps of houses.⁶⁸ Though the Japanese presence directly caused the starvation of the people of Singapore, the government could not stop the agency of a starving people to feed themselves with food that tasted of something. Little did these people know, at the end of the war, the citizens of Japan, people just like them, could personally relate to their situation. As was the case in Singapore, the departure of the Japanese did not mean that their starvation had ended. Indeed, as was the case in Japan, even under American occupation, the citizens starved for years after the war officially ended.

Some of the more militant, nationalistic officials in the Japanese government blamed their country's loss to the Americans on a lack of spirit on the part of the people. Had the success of the war effort actually been determined by willpower, this lack of spirit would be understandable. Starvation was rampant throughout Japan by 1945, and many lost the will to even pull themselves out of bed. Starved by the government and swindled by the black marketeers, there was seemingly no way out. Slow, yet eventful changes in Japan's food situation, as time went on, bolstered the hopes of many ordinary citizens. The widespread introduction of bread and bread-making occurred, symbolized by a baking device called the *Hōmu Beikā*.⁶⁹ Bread marked a turning away from rice, which was necessary due to prolonged shortages and an acceptance of wheat in the Japanese diet.

Changes in diet also called for changes in the nutritional value of said diet. While the prolonged starvation faced by the Japanese had a considerable impact on the general health of the populace; the diet of the time was naturally low in animal proteins and fats

⁶⁷ Wong. *Wartime Kitchen*, 2009, 79.

⁶⁸ *ibid*, 81-85.

⁶⁹ John W. Dower. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co. New Press, 1999, 169.

therefore lacked nutritional value. This contributed to thiamin deficiencies.⁷⁰ Revising the Japanese diet would require the military forces to pay special attention to the portion sizes of rations, as well as providing a variety of different foods. This needed to be done in order to prevent further nutritional deficiencies. In a pamphlet given out to civil affairs officers, The United States Naval Medical Research Institute attempted to address the problem of nutritional deficiencies in proposed rationing systems. One program would first saturate people already highly deficient in certain nutrients, such as thiamin, vitamin C, and riboflavin, with high doses of said nutrients for a period of eight days. After this period, a minimum nutritional diet would be compiled and followed.⁷¹ The pamphlet stresses the importance of building a diet that could be considered palatable to the Japanese. This means using ingredients that are familiar, while avoiding those that are unpalatable, such as lamb, cheese, and oatmeal.⁷² Possibly coincidentally, it also states that Japanese families should create vegetable plots in their yards, thus bringing the concept of self-sufficiency back onto the mainland.⁷³ With the black market continually on the rise, this may have been seen as a possible way of keeping citizens away, especially as it took on darker, more dangerous undertones. The ability for one to get rich quickly, if they had the means to get supplies and remain undetected by the police, provided new opportunities for those who, before, had been considered to be people who were less than desirable associates.

The black market was intertwined with gangs and gang activities. Gang leaders were able to create lucrative enterprises from selling products through their well-organized market systems. One of the best examples of black market leadership was Giichi Matsuda, who controlled the Shinbashi market in Tokyo. Politicians and police

⁷⁰ Johnston, *Japanese Food Management*, 1953, 91-92.

⁷¹ Naval Medical Research Institute, Far Eastern Nutritional Relief, *Japanese Culture*, 1944, 15, 2.

⁷² *Ibid*, 14.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 15.

supported Matsuda, who was able to make profits from selling his product and approving requests from would-be vendors for permits.⁷⁴ These permits were difficult to get, though Matsuda's influence with the police could circumvent the restrictions created by the government. The ability to source products from agricultural and fishing villages, former military stocks, and even from the Americans came from the ties with the police these leaders had. It also came from the uncanny ability to stay under the radar long enough to keep the police from having to act. Gangs made up of people who refused to be repatriated to their countries also created lucrative businesses through black market trading.

People from Korea and Taiwan made up the majority of those who set up shop within the black markets. These gangs often came into contention with their Japanese counterparts. This meant that territories between market districts were carved out. However, fierce competition, as well as racial tensions led to violent situations that endangered innocent people in the area. The assassination of Matsuda Giichi in June 1946 brought these tensions to a head. Fighting between Japanese gangs and combined forces of Koreans and Taiwanese led to the deaths of seven people, with thirty-four injured.⁷⁵ This outward display of violence and gang activity served as an embarrassment to the police and government, who were seen as incompetent and unwilling even to take care of problems that sat underneath their noses. The system encouraged people to become as cutthroat as possible, while victimizing even the poorest citizens.

However, not all shops were illegal. Koreans especially saw the opportunity to introduce scores of Japanese people to Korean cuisine.⁷⁶ Due to shortages of meat products, many Korean dishes that were meat based became based on offal. Despite the Japanese distaste for offal or innards of any kind, these dishes came to be regarded as rare treats.⁷⁷ This change in attitude concerning food

⁷⁴ Dower. *Embracing Defeat*, 1999, 142.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 143.

⁷⁶ Cwiertka., *Modern Japanese Cuisine*, 2006, 149.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 150.

illustrated the level of desperation of some of the people. In a situation such as this, it made sense to change what one found palatable when any piece of food was treasured. At least for a short amount of time, the sharing of food served as a way to ease racial tensions that had been so prevalent only months before.

The widespread abuses of the common people, both within Japan and throughout its wartime empire, exemplify the government's decided lack of emphasis on food policy. The government allowed the populace to suffer before its soldiers. Even those who chose to fully believe the propaganda at the time and fight for the "liberation" of Asia from the west found themselves, by the end of the war, betrayed by the government's defeat, spiritually broken, and hungry. Once the soldiers began to suffer, however, even they could not be protected, as the desires of the high officials came before the lives of the soldiers they had convinced to fight for the emperor. The declining nutritional intake on all accounts led to illness, which led to even more death. Even as the war ended, the government lacked sufficient motivation to fully protect its citizens from starvation. Some were deprived for so long that death would be a gift greater than almost anything; anything except a bowl of "silver" rice and a *manju*.⁷⁸ During the war, the Americans, as enemies in a military conflict tend to do, exacerbated, Japan's food situation. After the war and during the occupation, the Americans kept their hands off of Japanese economics, forcing the population to rebuild themselves. While this may have been seen as a necessary step, it allowed the suffering caused by starvation to remain unabated for years after the conflict had ended.

The fight against starvation, seen through the eyes of those suffering against it, is a bleak one. Every fruitless search for a morsel chipped away at the walls of sanity, while creating self-doubt, frustration, and, deadlier than anything else, apathy. However, the value of these stories, told by those who survived and died, is one that needs to be better appreciated. In a strange way, the terrible suffering caused by deprivation bridged gaps across generations, economic situations, and oceans. It not only re-establishes the

⁷⁸ A traditional Japanese confection made from powdered rice, buckwheat, and flour.

humanity of those who, before their stories were told, were relegated to being mere statistics, while also humanizing those who have been seen for decades as less than human. The paradox of modern society, with abundance and militarism coinciding together hope can be symbolized by a bowl, no bigger than their outstretched hands, filled with a mountain of pearly white rice.

