

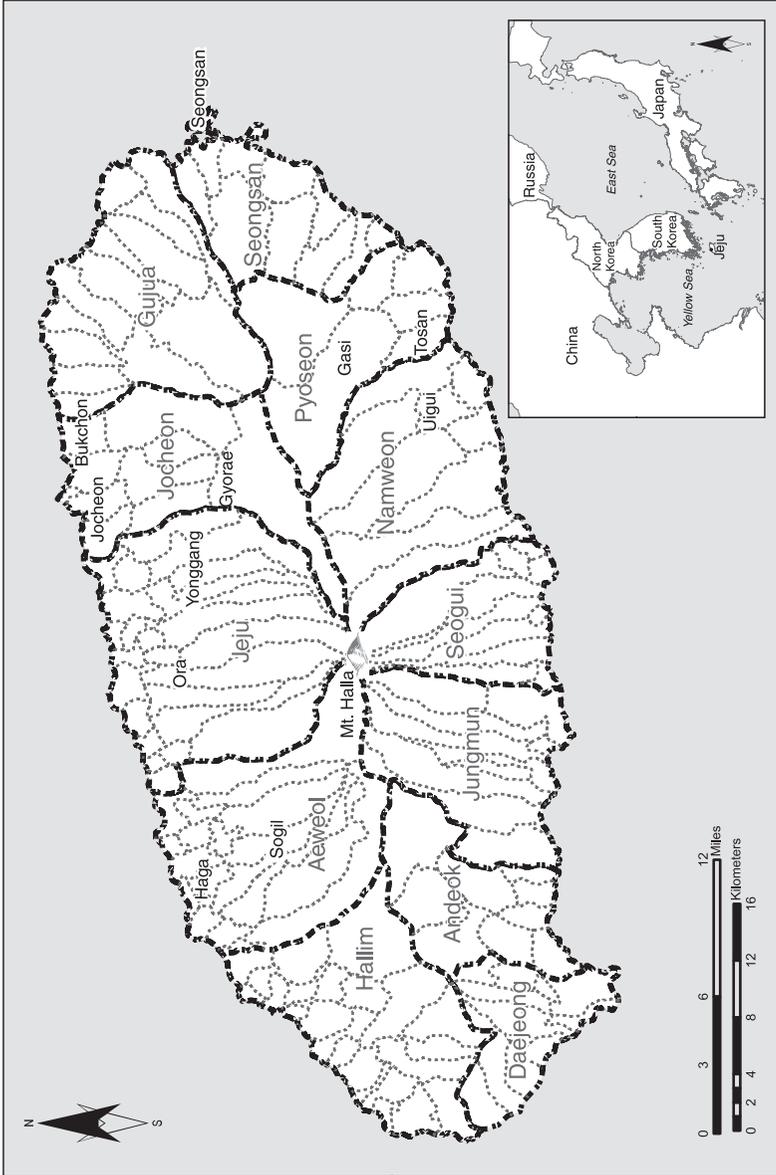
THE JEJU 4.3 EVENTS

Before 1950 no place suffered the political conflicts of liberated Korea like Cheju [Jeju]. . . . Cheju is a magnifying glass, a microscope on the politics of postwar Korea, for in no place else were the issues so clear and the international influence so tangential as in the peasant war on this windswept, haunted, magnificent island.

BRUCE CUMINGS, *The Origins of the Korean War*

No one knows the exact number, but between 1947 and 1954 somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000 civilians were killed or wounded on Jeju Island. In March 2011, the Jeju Commission announced that 15,100 victims had been identified, of whom 10,729 (71%) had been killed, 3,920 (26%) had disappeared, 207 (1.4%) had been injured, and 244 (1.6%) had been imprisoned. The commission also identified 31,255 family members of the victims. As the population of Jeju was around 280,000 in 1948, what became known as the Jeju 4.3 events affected almost every family on the island. Most members of the local elite, whether on the ideological right or the left, were killed, disappeared, or fled, and this led to the self-deprecating saying that “the smart ones who were literate were all killed during the events and only illiterate persons like me survived.”¹

Of the individual cases, 84.4 percent of the harm was said to be caused by state agents such as the police, the military, rightist youth groups including the Northwest Youth Association; 12.3 percent was said to be caused



Jeju Island

by the insurgents.² Most victims were in their teens and twenties, but 12 percent were civilians under ten years old (5.5%) or more than sixty years old (6.5%).³ Of all civilian victims, 79 percent were male and 21 percent female. The percentage of children, the aged, and women among the victims suggests the indiscriminate nature of the killings. Most victims were killed in 1948 (53.1%) and 1949 (34.2%), within two years of the outbreak of the armed uprising. Mass killings were concentrated—with 63.4 percent of deaths—in the five-month period between October 1948 and February 1949, when the authorities set up their headquarters and carried out the most severe crackdown.

Civilian massacres took several different forms during the counterinsurgency campaigns. Most mass killings occurred in the mountain villages during the crackdown period. Anyone found in the interior of the island was considered a rebel and was summarily executed.⁴ Many interior villages, such as Gyorae, Haga, Sogil, and Tosan, were wiped out. For example, in Gyorae, at 5 a.m. on 13 November 1948, the military closed in on the whole village and started to burn houses, killed everyone trying to escape from the fires, and then threw the dead bodies back into the fire to destroy all the evidence. Within one hour, soldiers killed twenty-five residents, including five children under ten years old and six people over sixty years old. Yang Bok-cheon, who miraculously survived the massacres, testified to the commission:

I was at home with my nine-year-old son and three-year-old daughter. At dawn, I heard loud gunshots everywhere. I never imagined that they were killing villagers. When soldiers came to burn down my house, I begged them to spare our lives. But the soldier pushed me down and pulled the trigger; the bullet went through my side and made a big hole—about a size of an adult's fist—in my daughter's thigh, who was on my back. Immediately, my son rushed toward me screaming, "Mom!" Then, the soldier fired a gun at my son. I can still clearly remember soldiers saying to each other, "The little bastard is not yet dead!" My son's heart protruded through the skin since he was shot on his left chest. They were not human!⁵

At Haga, soldiers killed another twenty-five residents, including Ko Sun-hwa, who was in the last month of pregnancy. Kang Eung-mu testified about the death of her husband:

Three soldiers rushed into the room and dragged him out. They gathered some spectators and shot him several times with an automatic gun. Several

bullets penetrated him, but my husband was resilient. Then, one soldier cut my husband's head off with a sword and his blood splattered all over. I regarded them not as soldiers but as butchers.⁶

At Sogil, soldiers killed another 34 residents and burned the remains in order to destroy the evidence. At Tosan, soldiers killed around 150 residents over the two days of 15 and 16 December 1948. The military summoned all villagers and killed any male resident between eighteen and forty years old.⁷

Some families who had taken refuge in nearby mountain caves so they could save their livestock and crops were shot and killed. Several operations led to large-scale massacres such as that in Yonggang village, where one hundred villagers were killed and officially reported as insurgents. In a similar incident, four or five families—fifteen to twenty villagers—hiding in a cave were discovered and executed. Similar killings took place at Banmot cave, Darangshi cave, and Bilemot cave. On 16 January 1949, police killed sixteen residents whom they found taking refuge in a cave. The only survivor, Yang Tae-byeong, testified:



Figure 2. Refugees living in a temporary residence (May 1948) (US National Archives and Records Administration)

In the cave, there were about thirty-six people who took refuge. Everyone felt relief since the entrance of the cave was very narrow and the cave itself was located in a very secretive place. However, I did not lower my guard but always sought out another hideout. One day, the police discovered the cave! All residents hid themselves deeply in the cave, but the military appeared, saying, “Don’t worry, we will save your lives.” Everyone else walked out of the cave, and, immediately, the military killed them all. The police even grabbed the legs of two children and brutally killed them by smashing them against the rocks. That is something a human could never do! I am sure that those murderers did not have a peaceful end to their lives.⁸

In other cases, whole families—and often whole villages—were wiped out, simply because one relative or villager joined the insurgents or merely went missing. For example, the police killed sixty-three family members and relatives of young people who disappeared in Hagui village. Ahn In-haeng witnessed and survived the massacre because his dying mother, who was covered in blood, wrapped herself around him. He testified:

The police first summoned all villagers to the nearby hillside and then searched every house and found two persons, a seventy-year-old father and a thirty-five-year-old son. A policeman started to severely beat the son, and then the father begged for his son’s life, and the other policeman started to beat the old man. The old man soon died, and the son ran away; immediately the police opened fire and shot him to death. Then, the police pointed out one woman—a twenty-five-year-old pregnant woman. The police first hanged her to a tree by putting a rope around her shoulders, and then three policemen stabbed her with swords. . . . Everyone turned his eyes away from the scene, but the police forced us to watch.⁹

Similarly, in Gasi village, residents were summoned by the military, who then identified families with members missing. They killed seventy-six villagers on the spot.

The military often deceived residents into applying for amnesty for simple misdeeds such as aiding, supporting, or not reporting insurgents, and then they arrested and executed them. In Jocheon, 200 residents turned themselves in to ensure their safety in the midst of the fighting;

150 of them were executed over the subsequent two weeks in December 1948. In many cases, the military and police disguised themselves as insurgents and lured villagers into supporting them before killing them all. In many mountain villages, the police and military had control during the day, but at night insurgents took over and killed those who cooperated. Residents were often sandwiched between the two combatant groups.

Around fifty members of the local elite, working in law, education, journalism, public office, and private firms, were detained and executed in the fall of 1948. Revenge killings were also frequent, and sometimes whole villages were targeted when counterinsurgency forces were discovered nearby. For example, on the morning of 17 January 1949, two soldiers were killed in a surprise attack by insurgents near the coastal village of Bukchon. Ten elders of the village, afraid of possible retaliation, brought the two corpses on stretchers to the military headquarters. The military



Figure 3. Residents at the foot of Mt. Halla (May 1948) (US National Archives and Records Administration)

executed all elders, except a close relative of one of the policemen, on the spot. By 11 a.m. the military had raided the village, driving the villagers from their houses and burning the houses down. They burned around four hundred houses, while summoning one thousand villagers, including the old and the weak, to the elementary school. For around five hours, the military searched for collaborators and informers, executing around three hundred villagers on nearby farms. They killed another one hundred villagers the following morning. Kim Byeong-seok, a policeman who witnessed the massacre as a driver of the police ambulance, testified:

Then, the military burned all houses in Bukchon and summoned all residents to the Bukchon Elementary School. The commander of the battalion in charge first ordered the soldiers to “separate out the family members of the police and the military,” and then they had a meeting with his staff in my car. Since my car was an ambulance, it had two side benches, and seven or eight officers sat at the benches. Officers suggested several ideas about how to kill the residents, and some even said, “Let’s kill them all by striking them with several mortars.” Then, one of them suggested, “Since there are still many soldiers who have not yet had the experience of shooting anyone to death, I think it would be good if each platoon takes their portion and then execute them by shooting.” His idea was adopted, and I was frightened out of my senses.¹⁰

This massacre at Bukchon later provided Hyun Gi-yeong with a motif for his short story “Aunt Suni” (“Suni Samchon”) in 1978,¹¹ which became turning point in the campaign to start an investigation.

The number of massacres declined dramatically after March 1949, when the insurgents were mostly defeated, but they increased again with the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950. In order to avoid disruption and insurgency in a noncombat zone in the South, the police and military quickly arrested former Communists and anyone whom they suspected of being Communists or their supporters. They also took into custody anyone closely related to suspected Communists—spouses, siblings, or relatives. This illegal practice resulted in the detention of large numbers of civilians. From June to August, more than 1,100 suspects, including public servants, teachers, students, and housewives, were held in preventive detention centers. In late July most detainees were taken from the detention centers; they were never seen again. The families of the victims still do not

know when and where they were executed. The testimonies of survivors and witnesses indicate that about five hundred victims were buried at sea near the port of Jeju, several hundred were shot dead and buried near the airport, and a couple of hundred were killed in a cave that had been used as an ammunition depot during the colonial period. However, there was one exception. Detainees who were under the supervision of the Seongsan police station survived, mainly because Chief Mun Hyeong-sun resisted the order to execute them all.

Mass arrests and civilian killings during the early phase of the Korean War were not confined to Jeju but were a nationwide practice. Within a three-month period, at least 300,000 people were detained and subsequently disappeared nationwide. In addition, immediately after the war, prison inmates were executed, and around 2,500 people who had been imprisoned in connection with the Jeju 4.3 events also disappeared. Most of these inmates were the victims of harsh suppression by the military operation that



Figure 4. Detainee camp at the Jeju Agricultural School (November 1948) (US National Archives and Records Administration)

included sweeping arrests and detention of residents in the mountain villages. Only 200 of those imprisoned were convicted in civilian courts; the remainder was convicted by court-martial, which was widely suspected of lacking objectivity and ignoring due process. Among those who were tried by court-martial, 350 were sentenced to death and were immediately and secretly executed and buried. The trial process was summarily concluded within two weeks. Judging by the simple fact that 871 people were convicted at twelve public trials in 1948 and a further 1,659 were convicted at 10 trials in 1949, it is highly doubtful that these court-martials followed due process. In addition, according to witness accounts, torture was widely used to extract confessions—in most cases, false—which were later used to justify convictions and executions.

Why did these gruesome atrocities against thirty thousand islanders occur? In order to understand the nature of the civilian massacres and surrounding debates, I start with the historical background of South Korea between 1945 and 1948, and then provide details of the armed uprising and counterinsurgency operations in Jeju. After democratization in South Korea various analysts and commentators in the fields of history, sociology, and political science tried to explain the Jeju 4.3 events. Most important are the key findings of the Jeju Commission and its final report, which as of 2013 has not been translated into English.

Historical Background

The modern history of South Korea started in 1945 with the country's liberation from thirty-five years of repressive Japanese colonial rule. Although the Japanese authorities pursued a conciliatory policy known as "culture rule" between 1920 and 1930, through most of the period the colonial authorities relied on coercion, terror, and surveillance to govern the Korean peninsula.¹² With the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the colonial authorities adopted an assimilation policy aimed at erasing Korean national identity and incorporating Koreans as second-class citizens of the Japanese polity. During this period, the colonial authorities effectively used many Korean collaborators from different walks of life to induce voluntary submission to their rule and suppressed all indigenous and independence movements. Korea also became a key source of

manpower and resources for the Japanese military and industry during the Second World War. Some 140,000 Korean men and women were victims of forced labor, and thousands of women were forced to work as sex slaves, or “comfort women,” for the Japanese military. This all came to a sudden end, however, when the Japanese emperor surrendered to the Allied Forces on 15 August 1945. The liberation came suddenly. According to Gregory Henderson, who pioneered the study of modern and contemporary Korean history, it “burst like a bombshell into the Korean world.”¹³

Korean history between 1945 and 1948 was marked by a brief moment of enthusiasm for the new and unified Korean state, as well as by US and USSR military occupation, conflict and power politics between the left and right, terrorism and assassination, riots and revolutions, a failed attempt to reestablish a unified government on the Korean peninsula, and the creation of separate governments in the North and South. The Jeju 4.3 events, counterinsurgency actions, and civilian massacres all occurred within the context of this series of critical political events. In order to understand the political dynamic of this three-year period, we first need to examine the role of the US occupation forces, which later set up the military government and heavily influenced both the political and socioeconomic structure in South Korea.

Partly because independence movements had been sharply divided along ideological lines and partly because liberation came unexpectedly, there was no single group that could exert power and authority, concentrate political forces, and represent Koreans in the international community. Although the Korean Provisional Government, led by President Kim Gu, existed in Chungking, China, there were no iconic political figures who could unite the various political factions on the Korean peninsula.¹⁴ At the time of the Japanese surrender, most independence movements were based in China and the United States. Japanese authorities, despite their police and military forces, fearing for their own loss of lives and property, approached the Korean leaders for protection. As a result, an interim authority, the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence (which later declared itself to be the Korean People’s Republic) was set up and led by Yeo Un-hyeong and Ahn Jae-hong to maintain law and order until the establishment of a new Korean state or, at least, until the arrival of the Korean Provisional Government from Chungking. However, the interim authority officially lasted a mere twenty days until the arrival

of the US Army on 7 September 1945. The US Army then established a US military government and declared it the only legitimate power. This government ruled the peninsula until the establishment of the Republic of Korea in August 1948.

However, the US occupation forces operated within a highly complex web of domestic social and political interests. In December 1945, five major political groups existed in South Korea, encompassing the full ideological spectrum and heavily dependent on personal leadership. According to Sim Ji-yeon, a prominent scholar of Korean party politics, the following major political parties existed in South Korea in 1945: the South Korean Labor Party (led by Park Heon-yeong), the Korean People's Party (Yeo Un-hyeong), the Korean Nationalist Party (Ahn Jae-hong), the Korean Independence Party (Kim Gu), and the Korean Democratic Party (Rhee Syng-man).¹⁵ These parties were often identified by their ideological platforms and their positions on four highly controversial issues: collaboration, the Cold War divide, land reform, and form of democracy.¹⁶ The rightist groups tended to be more generous toward those who were considered to have been collaborators and traitors during Japanese colonial rule, whereas the leftist groups took a harsher approach. The rightists were pro-American and anti-Soviet, whereas the leftists took the opposite view. The rightists were reluctant to carry out major land reforms, whereas the leftists actively supported such measures. The rightists pursued liberal democracy, whereas the leftists favored social democracy. In addition, the rightists opposed the indigenous nation-building efforts of the Korean People's Republic, whereas the leftists either actively participated in it or supported it.

After liberation, South Korean society leaned toward change, reform, and revolution, and leftist groups had widespread public support.¹⁷ The leftism at this time was "almost synonymous with opposition to Japan and it made the Korean masses highly sympathetic to the left."¹⁸ In contrast to the rightist groups that had collaborated, hidden, or fled under colonial rule, the leftist groups were sincerely admired by many for their unflagging underground resistance. However, this all changed with the political struggle over the Moscow Agreement of January 1946. In Moscow, foreign ministers of the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain agreed to set up a joint commission to assist the formation of a provisional democratic and unified government in Korea. The news reached Korea

through an exclusive news report that solely stressed the possibility of a four-power trusteeship, including China, for a period of up to five years before the creation of a Korean government. The public was outraged since they perceived trusteeship as another form of colonialism. Rightist groups seized the initiative to mobilize public opposition and strengthen their weak popular base.

The leftists also initially opposed the agreement, but later changed their position and supported it, arguing that the newspaper report was biased and that the trusteeship was not only different from colonialism but was also a necessary step toward the creation of a unified government. The difference between the Right and Left was clear: the leftists supported the Moscow Agreement in *totality*, focusing on the creation of a unified government in the Korean peninsula, while the rightists opposed the *trusteeship*, which they perceived as an extension of rule by foreign powers. The Moscow Agreement created a deep chasm between rightists and leftists, and represented a significant shift in the country's political topography in that public support for the leftist groups declined dramatically after it.¹⁹

Eventually, two political groups—one at each ideological extreme—remained at the center of South Korean politics. On the extreme left was the South Korean Labor Party, led by Park Heon-yeong; at the opposite end of the spectrum, Rhee Syng-man and the Korean Democratic Party formed a strong coalition based on their interest in maintaining the political and economic status quo.²⁰ Although moderate leaders were greatly respected by the public, they failed to create political infrastructure and popular support bases such as newspapers, schools, patrons, and organized loyalty, and they could not survive the violent political upheaval.²¹ For instance, Yeo Un-hyeong and Kim Gu were assassinated by extremists, and many moderate socialists such as Kim Weon-bong fled to the North.

The US occupation forces operated within this bipolar political context. Between 1945 and 1948, the US military government pursued three major policies: first, suppressing grassroots state-building efforts, reviving the colonial state apparatus and filling it with former colonial officials; second, banning the Communist Party and suppressing progressive social movements; and third, favoring rightist groups in the course of pursuing important socioeconomic policies such as the redistribution of vested land and industries.²²

The US military government declared grassroots state-building efforts illegal and dissolved the local councils that had been created across the country under the Korean People's Republic.²³ This was a big shock to the South Korean population, since the interim authority and the local councils, known as people's committees, "had come far closer to legitimacy than any other groups" and had control in most rural areas.²⁴ The military government retained the three most hated institutions of the colonial state—the police, the military, and the judicial system—and staffed them with former colonial officials, mainly for the purpose of administrative expediency. During the colonial period, the public saw the police as the most visible and oppressive agency in the country, and Koreans in the colonial police had been viewed as traitors. Nevertheless, the military government reemployed 85 percent of the former colonial policemen, which proved to be a grave mistake. In addition, the privileged colonial elite filled most positions in the administration, including the key posts.²⁵

Second, the anti-Communist policy of the US military government became official in May 1946 when the US authority smashed counterfeiting rings in which sixteen Communists had allegedly been involved. Three days later, publication of all leftist newspapers was suspended, and arrest warrants were issued for Communist Party officials, including the leader, Park Heon-yeong. The hostility between the Communist Party and occupation forces climaxed as Park ordered a "new strategy" in 1946, which is summarized by the motto "offense by way of self-defense."

The US military government had two main socioeconomic resources: the vested properties of the Japanese and US foreign aid.²⁶ The military government, which already controlled foreign aid, eventually gained control of the vested properties, which constituted 80 percent of real estate and industrial property.²⁷ The key posts administering these economic resources were held by the rightist groups, who used them to bolster their political influence. The military government ignored popular demands for revolutionary land reform for some time, and the belated land reform was a huge disappointment, as only a quarter of all arable land was redistributed. The failure of land reform resulted in part from pressure from the rightist landlord class in the Korean Democratic Party but also from simple incompetence and poor planning.²⁸

The military government's rice policy was another cause of nationwide frustration. The US forces first abolished the Japanese-style

rationing system, and this caused the price of rice to skyrocket. Within three months, the military government had reinstated the previous rice collection and distribution policy, which again met with strong resistance from the public.

In general, the military government's policies empowered the rightist political forces and suppressed the leftist groups. Even in 1946, Bertram Sarafan, an officer who served in the military government, pointed out that the military government had "adopted a position of 'neutrality' but it was no secret that it favored the right and was anxious for the parties of the right to acquire strong popular support."²⁹ These policies had two major consequences that created the preconditions for the Jeju 4.3 events: first, the failure of the implementation of the Moscow Agreement, and, second, nationwide popular uprisings.

In line with the Moscow Agreement, US-USSR joint commission meetings took place in March and May 1946 to discuss the process for creating a unified Korean government. The US and Soviet occupation forces, however, were unable to reach an agreement on selecting political parties and civil society organizations to be invited to the conference. In a growing global confrontation, both the United States and the Soviet Union wanted the new state in the Korean peninsula to follow its own model.³⁰ For instance, of the twenty parties and organizations that the US military government proposed, only three were leftist groups; and the opposite was the case for the Soviets. The talks reached a deadlock in May 1946, and in June Rhee Syng-man became the first South Korea politician to publicly raise the possibility of creating a separate government. On the failure of the joint commission, the United States transferred the Korean issue to the UN, and, as a result, UN-monitored elections were scheduled to be held on 10 May 1948. The obstruction of the UN election process, which would provide justification for the creation of separate government in the South, was one of the key goals of the Communist insurgents in Jeju.

Nationwide protests against the major policies of the military government occurred in 1946 with the September strike and the October protest. The September strike started, when railroad workers demanded increased wages, and soon spread to other sectors of industry such as printing and electricity. Similarly, the October protest started with a food demonstration by a couple hundred citizens in Daegu, but it soon escalated into a popular uprising in the southern provinces.

Both events were uprisings of people who were deeply dissatisfied with the military government's socioeconomic policies.³¹ At the same time, people's frustration increased with the government's policy of giving important positions to former collaborators and reappointing former police officers. Not only former policemen in the South but also those who fled from the North, with a clear record of collaboration, had been accepted into the police force.³² It was no coincidence that, in many parts of the country, former police officers were major targets of the violence. The military government suppressed these uprisings, using the police, the military, and rightist youth groups, and, in consequence, they successfully quashed the popular uprisings. Furthermore, the occupation forces, firmly believing that these uprisings were subversive acts based on Communist ideology, began a crackdown on all leftist organizations and social movements. Although Jeju did not participate in the uprisings, the widespread uprising and an increased antagonism against the military government certainly left a deep imprint on the islanders.

Furthermore, starting in 1947, the international environment made the occupation forces strengthen their support for anti-Communist and rightist political groups in South Korea. The US foreign policy of containment was finally institutionalized as the Truman Doctrine in March 1947, and the Marshall Plan was declared in June 1947. Moreover, by the end of the year, the prospect of a civil war between the Kuomintang government and the Chinese Communist Party went against the desires of the United States. At the same time, the US burden for funding the Greek-Turkey aid program increased as Great Britain withdrew from the plan. This made it extremely difficult for President Truman to ask Congress for money for an extension of the US military in South Korea. The United States made the decision to withdraw from South Korea, and a strong anti-Communist government in place in South Korea was a critical prerequisite for the withdrawal. All these domestic and international contexts pushed the occupation forces to create a bulwark against Communism in South Korea.³³

The Jeju 4.3 Events

Jeju is the largest island in South Korea, located in the southernmost part of the country. It is a volcanic island dominated by Mt. Halla, which is the

highest mountain (6,398 ft.) in South Korea. Due to its location and the presence of Mt. Halla, Jeju was considered a secluded, isolated, and mysterious island. For a long time, Jeju had been a place where government officials exiled from Seoul were sent. Jeju is equidistant from Japan and China and is considered a place of strategic importance in Northeast Asia. During the Second World War, both Japan and the Allied Forces saw Jeju as an important location for ensuring victory in the war. During colonial rule, Japan fortified the entire island and built three military air bases there, and the United States also considered building a naval base on the island in the 1950s. With the beginning of the Pacific War in 1941, the Japanese turned Mt. Halla into “a labyrinth of fortifications in preparation for an American attack.”³⁴

With the launch of a passenger boat service between Jeju and Osaka, Japan, in 1918, people from Jeju were able to work, trade, and study in Japan. Naturally, Japanese culture and products were easily imported to the island because of its location. Many Koreans returned from Japan after liberation, and Jeju recorded the highest rate of population mobility of all South Korean provinces. The estimated population of Jeju before 1945 was 220,000, but it reached 280,000 after 1946. Many returnees had received higher education in Japan, and this created a strong desire for education infrastructure in Jeju. Schools and local newspapers were founded earlier in Jeju than in other provinces. Furthermore, returnees had a higher level of national or class consciousness because many had experienced discrimination during their time in Japan. Within this social and cultural context, members of the local elite actively participated in the nationwide state-building effort. The Jeju People’s Committee, chaired by Oh Dae-jin, was set up on 10 September 1945, with one hundred representatives representing every town and county.

In contrast to the situation in Seoul, the Jeju local council remained in place for around a year, representing the local population and working with the local branch of the US military government, especially in maintaining public order.³⁵ However, as with provinces on the mainland, frustration with the major policies of the occupation forces grew over time. A couple of factors exacerbated the situation in Jeju. First, despite opposition from the local elites and the public, Jeju Island, which had long been a subordinate administrative unit of South Jeolla Province, acquired independent provincial status in August 1946. As a result, three key changes

occurred that stirred complaints from local residents: the amount of tax the new province needed to collect increased; the local administration and police numbers expanded significantly; and regimental forces of the army were stationed there. By 1948 the local police numbered five hundred, five times the number in 1945, and an additional four hundred army troops had arrived on the island. Second, Jeju's economy was deteriorating, mainly because the trading relationship with Japan that had sustained the local economy had been severed. Overseas workers had to return home, and their remittances discontinued.³⁶ Then there was a widespread cholera epidemic on the island in the summer of 1946. In addition, staple crops such as barley, millet, and sweet potato failed that year.

The underlying political and socioeconomic tension erupted on 1 March 1947 when leftist groups organized a rally to commemorate the twenty-eighth anniversary of the 3.1 Independence Movement of 1919.³⁷ As a precaution, one hundred police reinforcements arrived from the mainland in late February. A ceremony that the local authorities had authorized began at 11 a.m., attended by a crowd of around twenty-five thousand. At around 2 p.m., an unauthorized street demonstration was initiated. After about forty-five minutes, when demonstrators had already passed the city center where the police station was located, a six-year-old child among the spectators was hit by a mounted policeman, who then rode off. Enraged spectators pursued the policeman, who was retreating to the police station. The police opened fire on the pursuers, severely injuring eight people and killing six, including a fifteen-year-old student and a twenty-one-year-old mother nursing a baby.

The local police were quick to justify the shootings as necessary self-defense. However, public sentiment had already turned against the police, and even Governor Park Gyeong-hun admitted that the demonstrators had already passed the police station and the victims had all been spectators. In response, the local branch of the Communist Party organized a general strike; the result was an unprecedented province-wide strike in Jeju that began on 10 March 1947. Not only factory and office workers, teachers, and students in the private sector, but many in the public sector, including workers in provincial administration offices and most county and township offices, actively participated in the strike. Notably, even police officers participated in the strike, and, as a result, sixty-six officers were dismissed from the force. In all, around forty thousand local people from 166 organizations participated in the strike, which gives some indication of the provincial consensus surrounding the unjustifiable police shootings.



Figure 5. Policeman guarding the Jeju Police Station (May 1948) (US National Archives and Records Administration)

There were several subsequent small-scale conflicts between the police reinforcements and rightist youth groups, on the one hand, and the people of Jeju, on the other, such as those in Udo and Jungmun in March, Jongdal in June, and Bukchon in August.³⁸ Hostility toward the police forces from the mainland was certainly ignited by the shooting incident in March, but traditional enmity between the islanders and mainlanders fuelled the discontent. The proportion of mainlanders on the local police force had increased rapidly, and the shooting incident itself had involved police from the mainland. Traditionally, islanders distanced themselves from mainlanders;³⁹ the police from the mainland, in turn, had a negative stereotype of the islanders as unruly people, since six rebellions took place on the island during the nineteenth century.⁴⁰ To make matters worse, a new extreme rightist governor, Yu Hae-jin, took office in April 1947, and two local rightist youth groups—the Korean National Youth Association and the Northwest Youth Association—were formed with the governor’s support.⁴¹

Against this background, several leaders of the local Communist Party planned an armed protest against the police and rightist youth groups. At 2 a.m. on 3 April 1948, around 320 leftist insurgents, armed with twenty-seven rifles, three pistols, twenty-five grenades, and seven smoke shells, but mostly with swords, clubs, and bamboo spears, attacked police substations and the offices and residences of rightist political leaders. In the leaflets they handed out to the police and local citizens, the leftist forces made it clear that they would resist if the police and rightist groups continued to suppress leftist actions; they opposed separate elections and government in South Korea; and they resisted “cannibalistic” US imperialism.⁴² As a result, four policemen were killed, six were injured, and four remained unaccounted for; eight civilians were killed and nineteen injured; two insurgents were killed and one was captured.

There were two facets to the initial response to the armed uprising: a hard-line policy of prompt suppression and a conciliatory policy of appeasement. The police, who were the key target of the insurgency, advocated



Figure 6. Confiscated weapons from the insurgents, including bamboo swords and axes (May 1948) (US National Archives and Records Administration)

a hard-line policy, whereas the military were in favor of appeasement. (Initially, the insurgents only attacked the local police and made a clear distinction between the police and the military. Thus, the military remained neutral and tried to avoid becoming involved.⁴³) The occupation authorities dispatched two hundred police reinforcements within a week, blockading the island. Importantly, the director of the Korean National Police, Cho Byeong-ok, asked the president of the national Northwest Youth Association, Mun Bong-je, to send around five hundred “committed anti-Communist” members to Jeju. At the same time, at the request of the US occupation authorities, Colonel Kim Ik-ryeol, commander of the 9th Regiment in charge of Jeju, met with the leader of the insurgent forces, Kim Dal-sam, and reached a peace accord on 28 April 1948.

Despite this, a critical incident occurred three days later in Ora village. After the funeral of the wife of one of its members, around thirty rightist youth group members set the houses of the local leftists on fire in retaliation. About three hours later, around twenty leftist insurgents counter-attacked. Both the police and military arrived to investigate the incident, but they reached different conclusions. The police concluded that the insurgents initiated the attack, while the military reported that the rightist youth group members had triggered it. The US occupation forces adopted the former view, declared the incident a serious breach of the peace accord by the Communist insurgents, and ordered the prompt suppression of the insurgency. Interestingly, the whole incident itself was filmed from the air by a US aircraft and made into the propaganda film, *May Day on Cheju-Do*. The film was edited in such a way as to justify the subsequent hard-line policy by showing insurgents initiating the attack on the village.⁴⁴

Colonel Kim Ik-ryeol, who had led the peace talks with the insurgents, was replaced by hardliner Colonel Park Jin-gyeong on 6 May 1948, and, with the elections approaching, the leftist attacks became more frequent. The insurgents attacked the local election administration committees, burning voting lists and ballot boxes. In addition, election officials, who were usually members of the rightist groups, became the targets of assassination. As a result, the elections in two of the three electorates in Jeju were declared invalid, and it was not until 10 May 1949 that new elections could be held.

Mainly due to the failure of the election, the military launched a full-scale counterinsurgency operation in June and July 1948, “sweeping through the mountains from west to east.”⁴⁵ Colonel Park employed a three-phase

counterinsurgency strategy: first, to create strategic villages with fortresses and train local militia around the coastline; second, to conduct massive sweeps of the interior of the island by burning all mountain villages and relocating residents to refugee camps; and finally, to remove suspected Communist insurgents and their supporters from refugee camps.



Figure 7. Captured insurgents (May 1948) (US National Archives and Records Administration)

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Colonel Park's indiscriminate and swift counterinsurgency operation began in mid-May, and, in several battles, hundreds of Communist guerrillas were arrested. However, the arms seized were insignificant, which indicates that "battles" against "Communist guerrillas" were, for the most part, military operations against residents of the mountain villages. For example, over a six-week period, the military and police indiscriminately arrested four thousand suspects, of whom only five hundred were subsequently detained. They used torture widely in the course of the interrogations of refugees and detainees, which occasionally led to false testimonies and often to death. The sweeping arrests caused many young people in the mountain villages to flee their homes; in an ironic twist, most of them joined the insurgents. In addition, Colonel Park himself was assassinated by his subordinates, who opposed the cruel and indiscriminate military operations.

The fighting intensified after the creation of the separate South Korean government in August 1948 when the insecure government, backed by US military forces, decided to quickly end the war. Both domestic and international political situations pushed the government and the US military advisers toward a hard-line policy. First, after the split with the South,



Figure 8. Detainees waiting for interrogation (November 1948) (US National Archives and Records Administration)

in September 1948 a Soviet-influenced Communist government was established in the North under the leadership of Kim Il-sung. In the course of this, the Communist Party in the South organized the “underground election” to elect representatives who would participate in the Haeju Conference and support the creation of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Six representatives from Jeju, including the leader of the insurgent forces, Kim Dal-sam, successfully escaped blockaded Jeju and participated in the conference. Kim expressed his full support for the government in the North. Thus, for Rhee Syng-man, the first president of South Korea, the Communist insurgency in Jeju meant that he faced confrontations with Communists on two fronts—both North and South.

To make matters worse, a watershed event that “threatened the foundations of the fledgling republic” broke out in Yeosu, a port city on the mainland, on 19 October 1948.⁴⁶ The 14th Regiment in Yeosu in South Jeolla Province, which was scheduled to be dispatched as reinforcements to Jeju, staged a revolt, “refusing to murder the people of Cheju-do [*sic*] fighting against imperialist policy.”⁴⁷ Around two thousand members of the armed forces under the leadership of Sergeant Ji Chang-su revolted and quickly took two cities, Yeosu and Suncheon, and the surrounding areas. The military revolt quickly turned into a popular uprising as the local Communist cells and leftists joined the insurgent troops. The revolt within the military was a major embarrassment and shock to both the nascent South Korean government and the US military.⁴⁸ The government suppression was extremely harsh, and, in the course of operations, the military arrested and detained all those suspected of being Communist insurgents or their supporters and executed them on the spot. Scholars and a local research organization estimate that around ten thousand civilians were killed, and, in all individual cases, they attribute responsibility for 95 percent of the deaths to the military.⁴⁹ The revolt had a major impact on counterinsurgency operations in Jeju by pressing the Rhee government and the US military advisers to promptly suppress the insurgents.

On 11 October 1948, various counterinsurgency forces—the army, navy, and police—were reorganized under the newly instituted Jeju Defense Headquarters in preparation for a full-scale counterinsurgency operation. On 17 October, the commander of the headquarters, Major Song Yo-chan, issued a decree stating that anyone who was captured without a permit within a five-kilometer radius of the coastline would be executed. This was

an extreme measure because many villagers in Jeju lived not only near the coastline but also at the foot of Mt. Halla, within the five-kilometer radius. Major Song reinforced the military by organizing civilian and student defense forces and incorporating an additional one thousand rightist youth group members as makeshift police or military forces. President Rhee proclaimed martial law in Jeju Province on 17 November 1948, and a full-fledged counterinsurgency operation began. The military razed mountain villages in order to destroy the hideouts and potential supply lines of the insurgents. Residents of the mountain villages were forced to abandon their houses, livestock, and farms, and they relocated to the coastal villages. The military forcibly relocated around eighty to ninety thousand residents of mountain villages, around one-third of the total population of Jeju.

The military operation relocating villagers and destroying food-supply and recruitment bases in the mountain villages was completed by the end of the year. This operation brought most of the population under government control and isolated the insurgency groups.⁵⁰ A full-scale operation against the insurgents began the next year, and between January and



Figure 9. Residents relocating from mountain villages to refugee camps in coastal areas (US National Archives and Records Administration)

March 1949 the military encircled Mt. Halla, defeating the main insurgency forces. Cornered insurgents made several attacks in January, but none of them were successful, and, in turn, the attacks seriously weakened the remaining forces. This was also the period when the mass killing of civilians was most concentrated. According to the report of the Jeju Commission, almost 80 percent of the deaths of children and elderly took place in this period.⁵¹

By March the military had almost destroyed the main forces of the insurgents, and only five hundred insurgents were left near Mt. Halla. Simultaneously, the military started an amnesty program and induced voluntary surrender. In April President Rhee himself visited the island and demonstrated the restoration of government control and a successful suppression of the insurgents. Consequently, new elections took place on 10 May 1949, exactly a year after the original date, while the leader of the insurgents, Lee Deok-gu, was killed by the police.

However, sporadic guerrilla warfare continued until the Korean War broke out on 25 June 1950 and the Communist insurgency and counter-insurgency in Jeju entered a new phase. During the Korean War, Jeju did not once come under the control of the North Korean military. The remaining insurgents resumed their attack in the hope that the People's Liberation Army from the North would make it to Jeju. However, after the successful Incheon landing operation led by General Douglas MacArthur, the North Korean army retreated. By 1952 the number of remaining insurgents had declined to just sixty-eight, and only five remained when the authorities officially lifted the restrictions on Mt. Halla on 21 September 1954.

Three Key Debates

The Jeju 4.3 events have been variously labeled as a democratic movement, a popular uprising, massacres, riots, rebellion, revolt, an anti-American struggle, a unification movement, and simply 4.3, which gives some indication of the ideologically controversial and polemic nature of the events themselves.⁵² In this section, I introduce three key debates regarding the characteristics and definition of the Jeju 4.3 events. Since these debates reappear in the course of the transitional justice movement in the 1980s and 1990s, I will leave the details for that later chapter but will here introduce the big picture.

The first relates to the characteristics of the armed uprising that started on 3 April 1948. Before 1987 the Jeju 4.3 events were mostly understood and referred to as a “Communist rebellion” (*gongsan pokdong*) in all public records, including government documents, mass media, and textbooks. By defining the key events as a Communist rebellion, civilian massacres and human rights abuses were easily justified as collateral to and a necessary part of the effort to prevent communization. However, since democratization in 1987, scholars and activists have begun proposing alternative definitions such as “popular uprising” (*minjung hangjaeng*) or “democratic movement” (*minjuhwa-undong*).⁵³ These scholars commonly agree that the armed uprising was, first, widely supported by the general public and, second, an inevitable response to the oppression and misrule of the US military government and the incompetent Korean government. There are also moderate and more cautious scholars and activists who refer to the “events” (*sageon*) or “4.3” (*sa-sam*) without expressly defining its characteristics.

There is also debate regarding the starting date of the Jeju 4.3 events. Before 1987 the orthodox view was that it started on 3 April 1948 when the Communist guerrillas launched an attack. With democratization, however, a revisionist view emerged arguing that it started on 1 March 1947 when dissatisfaction with the US military government exploded in a demonstration and the local police, under the control of the US military, opened fire, severely injuring eight and killing six. This incident led to a general strike in Jeju, followed by a series of confrontations that resulted in the government and local police drastically losing the support of the residents. According to this perspective, an armed uprising on 3 April 1948 was one of several instances of public resistance to the US military government, which originally started on 1 March 1947.

The debate on the starting date of the process is closely related to a third debate about responsibility for civilian massacres. The traditional argument is that the Communist guerrillas were mainly responsible for the disruptions, including the massacres and human rights violations.⁵⁴ In contrast, others now argue that since the armed protest was merely a response to oppression and misrule, the US military government and the nascent Korean government were responsible for the massacres and abuses.⁵⁵ A few scholars further argue that the United States, not the US military government, is responsible, since the United States had direct rule over South Korea at this time.⁵⁶

