



Food and War in Mid-Twentieth-Century East Asia ed. Katarzyna J. Cwiertka.

Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. xi, 196. ISBN 978-1-4094-4675-0.

Review by Hamish Ion, Royal Military College of Canada (ion-a@rmc.ca).

Got the munchies? This collection of essays investigates the lives of ordinary mid-twentieth-century people in East Asia and Micronesia by highlighting the connections between war-waging and the production, distribution, preparation, and consumption of food.¹ The roster of contributors includes seven historians, one political scientist (Strauss), and one anthropologist (Pollack). Besides its own intrinsic interest, the question of food in wartime is especially pertinent to the broader study of the impact of Japanese conquest and administration of large tracts of China and Southeast Asia on later revolutionary changes and wars of independence in those regions. As editor Katarzyna Cwiertka (Leiden University) puts it, food and eating policies and practices provide

an important index of change, and a privileged basis for the exploration of historical processes. Due to the all-embracing and yet very intimate nature of food, the scope of this book extends far beyond dietary concerns.... By exploring what happened to food during wartime, both on the battlefield and on the home front, and by tracing the transwar continuities of wartime food policies and their, often unanticipated, long-term consequences, this volume aspires to integrate wartime chaos into the historiography of East Asia. We argue that war was not a mere disruption, but rather a central force in the social and cultural trajectories of twentieth-century Asia. (5)

The essays gathered here are specifically concerned with the effects of occupation policies on subject populations rather than the military operations conducted to capture territory from the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 through the Cold War up to the late 1950s. The consequences of radioactive food on the lives of Japanese after Hiroshima and Nagasaki and on Marshall Islanders after the atomic tests there (1954) are pointed reminders of the lasting effects of the Second World War and its aftermath.

Food and War in Mid-Twentieth-Century East Asia identifies transwar consistencies as well as changes wrought by war long after the armistices and peace treaties were signed. Military historians have, of course, always understood that victuals and victualing play a critical role in the successful prosecution of any war, but also know that they are just one element in the organization of victory.² Napoleon's dictum "an Army marches on its stomach" is not always true in military operations, especially those involving speed and light forces. But, by their concentration on the importance of food in wartime, the case studies in this collection shed fresh light on the responses of East-Asian civilians to the disruption of food supplies and the specter of starvation amid the terrible suffering caused by the mid-twentieth-century wars.

In chapter 1, "From Riots to Relief: Rice, Local Government and Charities in Occupied Central China," Toby Lincoln (Univ. of Leicester) focuses on Wuxi County in the Lower Yangtze Delta in 1938-41. In particular, he examines the reaction and nature of the collaborationist state to Japanese rice policies

1. "The bulk of the chapters in this volume were born as papers presented at the cross-disciplinary international conference 'Food in Zones of Conflict,' which took place at Leiden University in August 2011" (xiii).

2. See, esp., Roger Knight, *Britain against Napoleon: The Organization of Victory 1793-1815* (NY: Penguin, 2014).

designed to ensure the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) was supplied before the Chinese civilian population. The strain this put on the people of Wuxi County induced “multiple local actors ... [to work] together to establish systems of rice relief, which illustrates that the Chinese state remained a powerful force in local society. Moreover, just as before the war, officials cooperated with local elites, charities and other organizations to alleviate social problems, and, in doing so, continued a long tradition of providing aid in times of crisis” (12). Chinese officials and charities in Wuxi County waited before choosing one side or the other in the war. However, the motivation for collaborating with the Japanese was to survive under an occupying power, and both individuals and organizations in Wuxi County were prepared to switch sides depending on changing circumstances.

Korea, too, felt the grim weight of Japan’s demand for its food to feed not only the IJA in Korea and Manchuria but also the population in metropolitan Japan itself. As Kyoung-Hee Park (Leiden University) notes in chapter 2, “Food Rationing and the Black Market in Korea,” by 1936–38, Korea was exporting 41 percent of its entire rice production to Japan, which constituted 63 percent of Japan’s total rice imports (30). Unfortunately, Korean rice production never fully recovered after a disastrous crop failure in 1939 and food shortages threatened ordinary Koreans with starvation. In 1940, food rationing was introduced into the peninsula to ensure a sufficient rice surplus to help feed both the IJA and Japanese civilians on the home islands. But rationing was never fully implemented, because the food supply simply could not meet the growing demands of the Korean population itself. Park stresses that the first objective of the Japanese government was “to secure surplus rice by restraining demand for it through every possible means, and to export it in order to improve the food supply situation of Imperial Japan” (47). Its use of civilian organizations, especially local patriotic associations (*aegukpan*), to distribute scarce rice spawned widespread corruption and increased black-market activity. Again, ordinary Koreans suffered the most.

In chapter 3, “A Dearth of Animal Protein: Reforming Nutrition in Occupied Japan (1945–1952),” Christopher Aldous (Univ. of Winchester) discusses the plans of Dr. Crawford F. Sams, head of the Public Health and Welfare Section in SCAP³ Headquarters in Tokyo, to change the Japanese diet during the occupation by introducing more animal protein into it. Occupation authorities brought enough relief food into Japan to avert famine there in the months after the war’s end, but Sams and the Occupation leadership lacked both a knowledge of Japanese food habits and the time required to make such significant changes in the Japanese diet. Aldous concludes that “while Japan’s economic recovery depended on sufficient food supplies, dietary improvement along the lines favoured by Sams required the economic growth and prosperity of later decades” (70–71).

In chapter 4, “From Feeding the Army to Nourishing the People: The Impact of Wartime Mobilization and Institutions on Grain Supply in post-1949 Su’nan and Taiwan,” Julia Strauss (Univ. of London) turns to government grain supply policies in the People’s Republic of (mainland) China, and Nationalist Taiwan after 1949. These policies were strikingly similar until 1951; both followed long-standing and even traditional approaches to grain management while applying lessons learnt from wartime experiences. Strauss also notes that, even as “the trajectories of the two Chinese states diverged in the early 1950s, each systematically exploited the rural sector by holding prices for grain down relative to urban wages and products” (90). Farm people bore the main burden of bringing about the postwar economic recovery.

Chapter 5, “The Feeding of UN Troops in the Korean War (1950–1953),” by the book’s editor, concerns the sheer logistical power of the US military in provisioning UN troops. While Korea had, like it

3. Supreme Command for the Allied Powers.

or not, served as the breadbasket for Japan in 1930–45, after 1950, it was the Japanese who helped produce and distribute food to non-Japanese troops—including South Koreans—fighting in Korea.

In chapter 6, “An Insatiable Parasite: Eating and Drinking in WWII Armies of the Asia-Pacific Theatre (1937–1945),” Aaron Moore (Univ. of Manchester) investigates the Chinese, Japanese, and American military forces, unsurprisingly finding that “in the end, a superior system of logistics proved critical in the Asia-Pacific theatre, especially one that did not simply rely on local (especially foreign) sources for its daily bread.” More controversially, he also asserts that “the triumph of the United States and its Pacific allies over the Japanese Empire was the success of a *system*, not an ideology or merely access to natural resources” (109). Some credit, however, should be given to the Allied soldiers for their decisive victories at the battles of Imphal and Kohima in 1944 as well as to the tactical innovations that allowed the British Fourteenth Army to dominate the Japanese in battle. In short, system alone did not turn defeat into victory. Elsewhere Moore writes of western internees and food in wartime Shanghai that “even if authors such as J.G. Ballard may have exaggerated the suffering of Western civilians in East Asia, it is clear that the quality and quantity of food was declining” (123). But Ballard and his parents actually lived through internment in Shanghai; there is no evidence that he ever exaggerated the suffering of westerners in East Asia. It is also a stretch, and certainly debatable, to claim that “food deprivation by former colonial forces (and their dependents) was thus one of the enduring experiences of the collapse of Western colonialism in Asia, where occupiers and their dependents were accustomed to being served by local food producers: in this sense, the loss of food was symbolic of the dissolution of their power at the hands of the Japanese Empire” (123).

Chapter 7, “The ‘Food Problem’ of Evacuated Children in Wartime Japan, 1944–1945,” by Samuel Yamashita (Pomona College), is an excellent study of the problem of feeding Japanese school children evacuated from major cities into the countryside in the last year of the war. On the one hand, Yamashita shows, Japanese civil defence measures in large cities did not include evacuating school children until the last moment. On the other, many Japanese adults showed great kindness in their selfless efforts to obtain food for those children.

Lori Watt (Washington Univ. in St Louis), in her elegant essay “A ‘Great East Asian Meal’ in Post-Colonial Seoul, Autumn 1945,” describes how a small group of Japanese colonials living in Seoul before their repatriation to Japan used food and cooking “to imagine Japan and their secure place in it” (162).

In chapter 9, “Learning about Radioactive Contamination of Food: Lessons from Hiroshima and US Nuclear Testing in the Marshall Islands,” Nancy Pollock (New Zealand Committee on Nuclear Disarmament) offers a compelling and disturbing look at the dire effects of nuclear detonations at Hiroshima and, after the war, in tests held in the Marshall Islands. The safety of food supplies again became a cause for great concern after the nuclear power plant disaster at Fukushima in 2011. Pollock’s study makes clear the pressing need to keep the public fully informed about the long-term repercussions of radioactive contamination of food supplies.

Katarzyna Cwiertka and the volume’s other essayists have illuminated an often overlooked aspect of the sufferings of ordinary people caught in the maelstrom of war and its aftermath. Each of the nine articles in *Food and War in Mid-Twentieth-Century East Asia* deserves careful reflection by a wide readership.