

During the almost seven years of postwar Allied Occupation, Japanese media, labor, and political parties were strictly controlled to effect a peaceful transition to democratic government. That changed on Monday, 28 April 1952, when sovereignty was restored following U.S. Senate ratification of the peace treaty. Both the old guardians of peace and Japanese officials were caught by surprise when Japanese Communists seized control of a labor-organized May Day assembly three days later (Thursday), turning it into an anti-American riot.

Over 300,000 people had gathered among the oak and willow trees of Meiji Park on 1 May 1952 for a peaceful labor rally. The largest unions, joined by Socialists, Communists, radical left-wing groups, and some 'fellow travelers,' would voice their opposition to an anti-subversion bill in the Japanese Diet. Folk dancing to traditional music entertained the working classes and their families before distinguished guests spoke.

Just as the labor union organizer, Minoru Tanako, started his announcements, a group of determined young Communists seated in the first row, jumped up, and charged forward. They quickly clambered onto the platform, grabbed the microphone, and hustled American Socialist, Norman M. Thomas, and the other scheduled speakers off the stage. Then, Japanese and North Korean Communist agitators exhorted a crowd of 10,000 to begin a snake-dance parade towards the Imperial Plaza three miles away in the heart of Tokyo. Along the way to the denied area U.S. military and

civilians were harassed. Marching rioters screamed "Yankee, go home" and hammered the sides of American cars caught by the human wave engulfing major streets. Then, well-organized teams violently rocked vehicles and methodically smashed out windows and headlights, terrifying those inside.

The assaults on U.S. automobiles were the prelude to serious street fighting. The poles carrying labor banners and flags became steel-reinforced bamboo spears, iron pipes, and wooden clubs. Awaiting the frenzied mob in the plaza fronting the Imperial Palace was a square of four hundred Japanese policemen. They were sent to disperse the primitively armed rioters. After the rear ranks pelted police with rocks and bricks, bags of offal, and tear gas, hundreds of rioters in front screamed "Banzai!" to beating drums and charged against them. Flankers felled policemen from behind. While Communist messengers carried orders into the ranks, teams of girls stood by to help the injured reach safety and first aid stations.

American military safely atop Allied headquarters buildings watched beleaguered police fight rioters hand-to-hand for two and a half hours. Among them were 1st Radio Broadcasting & Leaflet Group (1st RB&L) 'Gander' soldiers taking pictures and 'rubber necking.' Reinforced to 2,000 strong, police in full combat gear managed to disperse the Communist-led rioters with tear gas and pistol shots fired close overhead. As the sun was setting, only moaning, bleeding rioters, torn banners, broken spears, and abandoned clubs littered the Imperial Plaza.

The May Day Riots

by Charles H. Briscoe

Along street curbs, overturned American automobiles set afire, glowed into the twilight. The carefully planned and orchestrated Communist May Day riot left three dead and more than 1,400 people injured. The Japanese commoners, unaccustomed to violence at home, were shocked. The next day dozens of flower bouquets were presented to American families by embarrassed Japanese neighbors.

The May Day riots in Tokyo were a 'wake up' call for all Americans who had enjoyed privileges accorded 'conquerors' during the postwar Occupation and Japanese officials unused to and unprepared for all the aspects of democracy. Gone were the days of Far East Command (FECOM) Officers of the Guard (OGs) wearing shiny helmet liners and carrying 'facsimile' pistols. American military police (MPs) and guards and Japanese paramilitary police were on 'full alert' for the traditional birthday greeting by Emperor Hirohito on 3 May 1952. The OG, Second Lieutenant (2LT) James B. Haynes, Jr., 1st RB&L, had a steel helmet on and a loaded .45 caliber automatic to check the FECOM guard posts. He was escorted by a squad of combat-equipped MPs bearing M1 carbines and .45 caliber pistols. Japanese paramilitary police units were pre-positioned out of sight in lobbies of the largest buildings surrounding the Imperial Palace. Sergeant (SGT) Cecil A. Beckman, 3rd Reproduction (Repro) Company 'pulled' his only guard duty in Japan on 2 May 1952. The steel-helmeted admin sergeant marched back and forth atop a wall surrounding the FECOM Print Plant in Motosumiyoshi

with a shotgun at port arms. His vigilant presence was highlighted by two large spotlights.

While prepared for the worse scenario, nothing happened on 3 May. The Communists went 'to ground' following the riots. After the diminutive, spectacled Emperor in 'black tails and silk topper' humbly encouraged his people to embrace the tenets of democracy, keep faith with other nations, and solidify the foundations of the state, he was surprised, but pleased by resounding choruses of "Banzai!" from 10,000 people respectfully gathered on the Plaza. It would be several days before 1st RB&L personnel, who had watched the rioting, realized that 'their' Japan was no more. But, it happened at the time when most of the original 'Ganders' were close to finishing their two-year military service obligation and thus, the Tokyo riots of 1952 provided a memorable finale for many Psywar veterans.¹ ♠

Endnotes

- 1 Michael Rougier and Jun Miki, "Rioting Japanese Reds Tee Off on the Yankees," *Life*, Vol. 32, No. 19, 12 May 1952, 24-29; "Japan: Troubled Springtime," *Time*, Vol. 59, No. 19, 12 May 1952, 29, 31-32; James B. Haynes, Jr. Cecil A. Beckman, and Timothy L. Shields, interviews by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 22 September 2010, 1 October 2010, and 19 January 2011 respectively, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Cecil A. Beckman, Peter R. Lee, Barton S. Whaley, and Marvin Werlin, "Memories" in Thomas M. Klein, Anthony E. Severino, and Robert C. McConaughy, *Remembrances of the 1st RB&L Group, 57th Year Reunion, October 24, 2009*, 20, 21, 24, 34.

* Denotes photos credited to *Life* magazine, 12 May 1952



Lead Communist elements of the parade hurled a police barricade at a U.S. Army 6 x 6 truck by the Imperial Plaza. 1st RB&L soldiers were among those watching from the rooftop of Empire House. "The guys in the unit hit the streets with their cameras," remembered Marvin Werlin, 1st RB&L veteran.*

Protests began...

(Right) The May Day rally in Meiji Park began with entertainment by dancing girls and music. Spectators enjoyed ice cream cones and bean curd cakes while others waved festive, colorful banners.*
(Below) Japanese Communists swarmed the speakers' platform from ringside seats.*



Young labor, left-wing political followers, and radical students snake-danced down the main street with English language signs, cursing Americans, and yelling "Yankee, go home!" until their chanting turned into a vociferous roar.*

Student and labor union members carrying protest banners continued their snake-dance into the Imperial Plaza during the May Day riot. The banner and sign poles were later used as weapons. "In the middle of this chaos, someone shouted, 'My God, that's Margaret Bourke-White!' Sure enough, standing on top of a wrecked car was the world famous *Life* photographer and journalist taking photos of the riot," said Marvin Werlin, 1st RB&L veteran. (*Life*, Photo taken by Margaret Bourke-White, 2 May 1952)

Norman M. Thomas, American Socialist Party, was among the sponsored speakers forced off the platform.*



SGT Joseph E. Dabney, 1st RB&L, related that as Communists marched and burned automobiles, many went to the top of buildings to view the police and Communists in hand-to-hand combat.



Communist leaders yelling "Banzai!" exhorted the confused crowd to fall in line for a march to the Imperial Palace, three miles away in central Tokyo.*



"I saw a luckless U.S. sailor tossed into the Imperial Palace moat," recalled Peter Lee, 1st RB&L veteran.*



A bloodied student with the Communist "dove of peace" painted on his jacket was given first aid by friends. Taking a shortcut across the park after a dental appointment, 1st RB&L veteran Barton S. Whaley walked into a Communist aid station where bloody, injured civilians were being treated. "It seemed unearthly as it had to Tolstoy's young Pierre wandering in the battlefield during Napoleon's retreat from Moscow in 1812." Eleven year-old Timothy L. Shields (the 1st RB&L commander's oldest son), riding the Army shuttle bus into the city from Grant Heights, remembered seeing bare-chested young Japanese men wearing white headbands with red-painted symbols (like those headbands in *The Karate Kid* movies) running about.*

...violence ensued.



In the midst of tear gas Japanese police break ranks to attack rioters on an American car. "As soon as a tear gas canister was thrown into the midst of rioters, it was plucked up and hurled back at the police," said Peter Lee, 1st RB&L veteran.*



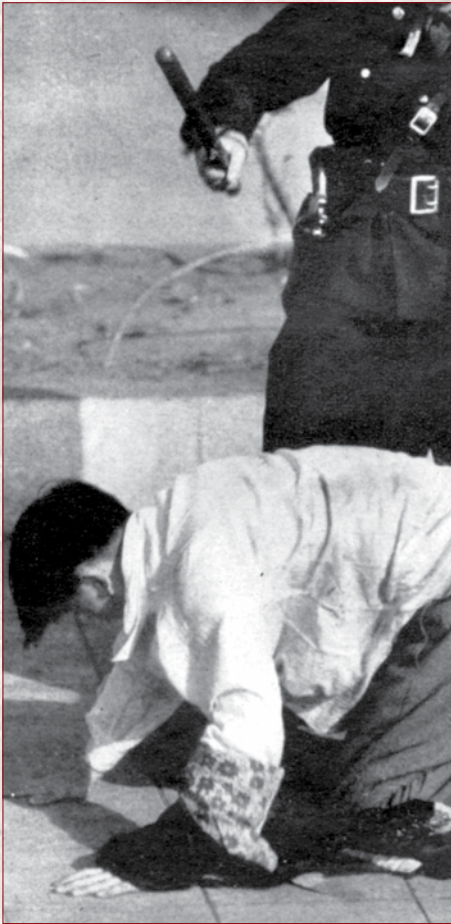
A policeman holds a Communist leader in a headlock while his comrades surround the prisoner.*



A score of American vehicles, overturned and set afire, were a haunting reminder that the Occupation era was over.*



An injured, bespectacled student is helped to safety by girls stationed nearby.*



Japanese police fought back as savagely as the frenzied rioters, whose leaders exhorted them to "Kill the police! Kill the police!"*



Holding one another and loudly moaning, "Let us die! Let us die!" an injured Communist couple dramatically posed for the cameraman. Police gave them first aid.*



An injured, unconscious policeman is dragged away from the Imperial Plaza cluttered with abandoned bamboo poles, pipes, and placards.*



Emperor Hirohito

Communist rioters bearing steel-spiked spears, iron pipes, and clubs storm the Japanese police on Imperial Plaza. (*Time*, 12 May 1952)