

Experiencing the 1952 Bloody May Day Incident

HASEGAWA Kenji

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Experiences

Introduction

"Today the 28th is a day of historical importance....It is the day when Japan emerges from defeat to become independent and start anew," the *Asahi Shinbun* proclaimed in its April 28, 1952 morning issue. At 10:30 PM, the moment the American occupation ended and independence formally restored to the Japan nation, the national anthem played on radios, temple bells rang through the night, and at the Imperial Palace plaza, a small crowd of about twenty people shouted of "Tennô heika banzai!" "Nihonkoku banzai!"

Cabarets and bars in Ginza awaited customers with lanterns inviting people to "celebrate the peace treaty." Some shops prepared massive amounts of champagne for the festivities. But there were few celebrators and independence turned out to be a decidedly anticlimactic event. The *Asahi Shinbun* described Tokyo at this "historical moment" as "quiet beyond expectation."¹

The quiet did not last long. On the day independence was restored, the Minister of Welfare repeated his prohibition of the use of the Imperial Palace plaza for the May Day celebrations planned for May 1, defying the court order of the same day nullifying the ban. Denied access to the "people's plaza," as the grounds had been called since the 1946 "Food May Day," the major May Day rally in Tokyo took place within the grounds of the Meiji Shrine. Thousands of people held placards protesting remilitarization, deterioration of workers' economic conditions, police intrusion into university campuses, the US retention of

Okinawa, and "April 28-the Day of National Disgrace." As the rally drew to a close, agitators goaded the crowd to march to the forbidden plaza in front of the imperial palace. Several groups of demonstrators led by leaders of Communist, Korean, and student organizations marched to the palace and forced their way through the police cordon and into the plaza. Bloodshed ensued as police attacked the crowd with batons, tear gas, and pistols. A municipal employee and student were killed, 22 demonstrators struck by bullets, and a total of 2300 people (1500 demonstrators and 800 police) injured in the melee.ⁱⁱ

Taking place a mere three days after the occupation's end, Bloody May Day became the most prominent incident involving the Communist Party's military tactics of the early 1950s. However as members of the Communist military organization that fomented the confrontation with the police were sworn to secrecy, much remains unknown about the incident. Drawing from narratives of the Bloody May Day incident from available sources, this paper will start to piece together the diverse ways in which people experienced the event.

Asahi Shinbun

Mainstream newspapers like the *Asahi Shinbun* provided similar accounts of the event. The May 1 evening edition of the *Asahi* is almost completely devoted to reporting the May Day celebrations. The first page describes a peaceful and festive atmosphere with participants singing workers' songs, vendors selling the previously outlawed Communist newspaper *Akahata*, others selling ice cream and soda. Like most participants, the *Asahi* reporters did not foresee the first post-independence May Day turning bloody.

It is not until the second page that we get any description of the bloody clash between demonstrators and police. The paper reports that illegal demonstrators who marched to the imperial palace plaza without the necessary notice to public authorities, more than five hundred of them armed with base-

ball bats, bamboo spears, and pachinko balls, were to blame for the bloodshed. They clashed violently with police who tried to stop the illegal demonstration, broke through the police cordon and "avalanched into" the imperial palace plaza. The Marunouchi police issued an order for the demonstrators to disperse. However as this order was ignored, the police "finally" resorted to tear gas and chaos ensued. In the course of the subsequent clash, police sergeant Uehara was critically injured when demonstrators assaulted him in the Marunouchi police station; police lieutenant Ogô sustained an injury to the face when a rock struck him while in the Akasaka police box.ⁱⁱⁱ

The following day's morning headline read that "A group among the demonstrators turn into rioters" and featured statements by police authorities. The Superintendent General explained that the bloodshed occurred because "Zengakuren, Koreans, and day laborers among others...trespassed into the imperial palace plaza. The police decided not to stop this trespassing out of consideration for the safety of general passers-by. We intended to disperse them by force after making them enter. I absolutely did not intend the officers to shoot. The shooting was an unplanned measure taken because officers' lives were in danger."

The front page editorial of the same day denounced the demonstrators' for their "extremely regrettable violent behavior." The writer's hope that the first post-independence May Day be held with "dignity and restraint befitting an independent nation" was dashed by a small group of agitators whose violent behavior "smeared disgrace on the honor of the Japanese nation" and cast a shadow on the freedom of political activity by necessitating stricter political controls. Fear of violent extreme leftist elements was reinforced by a small front page article that reported that "a mysterious radio broadcast" spreading Communist propaganda began on the night of May 1.^{iv}

Writing in the journal *Sekai*, the author Umezaki Haruo provided one

of the numerous counter-narratives to mainstream newspapers' unambiguous denunciation of the demonstrators. Umezaki describes how he saw about 300 fierce-looking armored policemen waiting at the imperial palace plaza when the first demonstration arrived there. For some reason, they opened a path into the plaza and let the demonstrators flow rapidly into the plaza. Umezaki, together with many other "normal" bystanders who were not participating in the demonstration march, gathered around an area outside the fence by the plaza. An old man pointed his finger and yelled that the police were coming but the demonstrators inside the plaza did not seem to pay attention. They seemed to have relaxed after entering the forbidden area. He writes:

And then, the policemen who ran along the right side of the demonstrators raised their batons and rushed the crowd at an angle. I cannot forget the sight of that moment. The heavily armed policemen dared to attack the almost totally unresisting demonstrators (there were many normal citizens among them) with an outrageously violent intensity. In the blink of an eye, there were many men and women bloodied by baton blows to the head rolling around here and there. The baton blows continued, next targeting the midsections of those who were on the ground clutching their heads. The police then stepped over them and chased the fleeing demonstrators.

With regard to the police shootings, Umezaki writes that he "didn't even dream" that the shots he heard were actual bullets. "Japanese shooting fellow Japanese was something totally unbelievable to me." The use of tear gas also took him by surprise. He first mistook the tear gas for smoke bombs used to warn the crowd. When he began to feel the effects of the tear gas, he was startled and ran for his life, eventually escaping the smoke and the police.

Others were less fortunate. Bloodied and groaning men and women

lay on the grass surrounding the imperial palace. In several places nurses started ad hoc field hospitals to treat the wounded. Umezaki heard that police confiscated the driving license of nurses trying to transport the injured to hospitals. "What an unreasonable thing to do," he fumes. Seeing such "anti-human" ways of the police, the bystanders began to side with the demonstrators. When some demonstrators overturned and lit fires to American cars parked nearby, the on-looking crowd tended to protect the culprits from the police pursuit.^v

Although such accounts in progressive journals and student newspapers offered many counter-narratives critical of brutal police actions-whose details would eventually come to light in the course of the twenty year trial that ensued-people relying on mainstream media like the Asahi Shinbun for news got an ominous and entirely negative view of the illegal May Day demonstrators as violent and dangerous elements.

The Japanese Communist Party's "Military Victory"

The Japanese Communist Party's underground newspaper *Heiwa to dokuritsu no tame ni* ("For Peace and Independence") agreed with the mainstream newspapers that the May Day incident was the result of a highly planned "military operation" carried out by Communist troops. But the newspaper considered the operation a military and political victory that won the nationalistic support of the masses by exposing the violent and repressive nature of the traitorous Yoshida government.

It describes how the operation was supported by "tens of thousands of citizen-masses." The "enemy" (police) tried to isolate the troops of "patriotic youths" from the masses by trapping and capturing them in the plaza, but their conspiracy failed as the masses came to side with the youths. The masses surrounded the police and cursed them as "traitors." The troops and the masses became one as they gathered around and cheered the mounting of the red flag

on the imperial double bridge. After a while the "enemy" attacked with pistols and tear gas, while "our side" retaliated with rocks, sticks, and tear gas canisters. With the support of the masses, the troops adroitly directed the fighting by giving directions for strategic maneuvers.^{vi}

Some Communist Party members had serious objections to the party leadership's exuberant assessment of the incident. Masuyama Tarô was a member of the Communist Party's Tokyo bureau who opposed the party's turn toward militarist tactics during the 1950s. He describes how, as independence was restored on April 28, the party's Tokyo bureau members repeatedly debated strategy for the May Day celebrations. Many rank and file workers were angry at the government's high-handed refusal to open the imperial palace plaza for the celebrations. Anger against what was perceived to be American aggression in Korea was also intense, especially among the Korean workers.

The bureau leaders debated whether or not the "people's plaza," the symbolically important site for people's revolt against authority during the occupation that MacArthur had denied demonstrators since the outbreak of the Korean War, should be "recaptured by force." Some members, including the bureau captain, argued that the end of the occupation provided an ideal opportunity to do this. Others, including Masuyama, were opposed. Hoping that a successful Sôhyô-led May Day would strengthen the left faction in the union, Masuyama argued that they should respect the union's leadership in the celebrations.

The conclusion, after an all-day meeting on the day before May Day, was to forego entering the people's plaza. The demonstrators would shout slogans protesting the government's unjust prohibition of the plaza's use as they passed the forbidden grounds. Student and worker organizations desiring the "recapture" of the plaza were to be kept away from the front of the demonstration by worker organizations under the bureau's control.

Remaining underground to avoid capture by police, Masuyama could not participate in that year's May Day celebrations. To make up for the disappointment, he wrote his long-separated wife and daughter and arranged to celebrate that night with a May Day dinner. In the letter, he wrote, "It has been decided not to enter the people's plaza. Please march proudly in the front for me." However he found out to his shock and dismay that the military operation was carried out despite the bureau's decision. He hurried to rendezvous with his wife and daughter that night, finding his wife with a head injury, his daughter with a bruised hip and trembling with fear.^{vii}

Masuyama was not the only Communist leader to be kept in the dark about the May Day military operation. Takizawa Rinzô, a senior at Waseda University, was chosen to be the sub-leader of his school's May Day march. He recalls that nothing specific was decided in advance about what the marchers would do once they reached the imperial palace plaza.

As the Waseda demonstrators marched toward the imperial palace's Babasaki gate, Satô, the leader of the Waseda group, directed the back portion of the marchers toward the Iwaida gate without informing Takizawa. Although he repeatedly sent messengers to try to contact the leader, Takizawa could not gain any information about what he and his group of Waseda students should do once in the plaza. "I don't know who was giving what kind of directions to Satô," he writes, "but what he did was nothing less than a wanton act that ignored the basic principles of group action..."

As the Waseda demonstrators relaxed in the plaza, the police suddenly attacked. Some demonstrators retaliated with stones and placards but they were no match for the determined rush of the police. Many demonstrators fled after this surprise attack but some strong-willed demonstrators returned and gathered around the plaza. Seeing to his surprise that there was no leader prepared to lead the group, Takizawa decided to take charge. He called on the demonstra-

tors to gather in order to perform the ending ceremony for the demonstration. Some gathered; others refused and threw stones at the police.

As Takizawa tried to lead the crowd, two messengers arrived one after another to inform him that "the southern demonstration force has arrived at the Iwaida gate," then that "the southern demonstration force has breached the Iwaida gate police line and is headed this way." Takizawa presumes in retrospect that these men were Communist activists "in" on the planned military operation whose job it was to run around conveying messages to leaders in the plaza.

Even after the demonstrators advancing through the Iwaida gate arrived in the plaza, no leader emerged. Some demonstrators threw stones at the police and some charged the police with poles, but most, Takizawa included, simply stood by idly. As they did so, thousands of demonstrators fell victim to the second police offensive.^{viii}

Many activists like Masuyama and Takizawa grew disillusioned with the Communist Party leadership during its military interlude of the early 1950s. The disillusionment would become even more widespread after the party leadership cavalierly abandoned its military tactics in the Sixth Party Congress of 1955. The Communist Party's problems were not confined to internal divisions. While many "normal" demonstrators and onlookers were antagonized by the police's violent tactics, many more people made the easy association between the Communist Party and violence. As an author of the Anti-Subversive Act predicted, the bloodshed quite possibly became "a source of advantage" for pushing through the controversial law.^{ix}

Zengakuren and the Masses

By the time of the Bloody May Day incident, the outbreak of the Korean War and the intensification of the reverse course had the Japanese

Communist Party fighting a defensive struggle. Its influence in the labor and agricultural movements had waned and the student movement, led by Zengakuren (National Federation of Student Self-governing Associations), became its last bastion. Students would thus play a central role in carrying out the Communist Party's military operations of the early 1950s.

On the day independence was formally regained, Zengakuren students conducted a ritual wake for Japan's independence. Ignoring the prohibition of the march by school authorities, students of Tokyo University paraded around the Hongô campus carrying the national flag with mourning crepe, forced open the main gate and welcomed in a group of students from Waseda and other universities of the Tokyo area. The flyer distributed at the rally read:

We respectfully mourn the loss of Japan's independence! With the traitorous treaties and administrative agreement, Japan has become a colony. The Japanese people shall never be able to forget this day the 28th. The lives of people are dark, and many women we love have fallen to become jeep girls. All people are resolved never to forget this day the 28th, the day of humiliation, the day of darkness. We shall fight. We believe that the nation's students will fight for peace instead of becoming slaves and scream 'voices from the sea'. We believe that the day of our victory is near. People of the nation. Crush the Anti-Subversive Act of war and subservience! Protect campus self-governance and academic freedom! x

While some students shared such emotions of injured masculine pride, mournful resolution, and nationalistic outrage, a central dilemma for Zengakuren leaders was their inability to construct a mass base for their movement. The Zengakuren pamphlet's prediction of an early "victory" rings desperate and beleaguered such a context.

According to the sociologist Yamamoto Akira, a leftist student activist during the early 1950s, he and fellow activists of the time held a fatalistic attitude regarding their ability to communicate with the masses. Student activists like Yamamoto participated in demonstrations with the vague hope that fighting courageously with their own bodies would win over sympathizers. Two scenes that Yamamoto recalls convey the mindset of student activists during this period.

The first concerned the illegal Anti-Colonial Day demonstration in which Yamamoto participated in February 1952. As the small group of student demonstrators marched with locked arms singing the "Communist Marseillaise" toward the group of police that awaited them at a large intersection, he saw people standing on the side of the road with perplexed expressions. Since the students did not hold placards or distribute leaflets, the onlookers had no way of knowing what the demonstration was about except through what they would later read in mainstream newspapers. The demonstration that day was crushed by the police. The next day's newspapers reported in small headlines the Anti-colonial Day demonstrations held throughout the country. But there was not one word about the demonstration that Yamamoto participated in. Reflecting on this tenuous and roundabout process, Yamamoto wondered why politics could not be done in a more "direct" manner.

Yamamoto's second recollection is his experience watching a proletarian movie in 1953 with students and workers. As the workers in the movie finally rose up in the climactic scene, the revolutionary song "The Song of National Independence Troops" rose to a crescendo throughout the theater.

Protect the freedom of the nation

Rise up workers of the fatherland

Protect the prosperous revolutionary tradition

Against bloodshed, with righteous bloodshed expel

Enemies of the nation, dogs that sell the country

Advance advance, with tight solidarity

National independence troops, forward forward advance

This song could not be sung in dormitories or in streets; it could only be sung in the student government rooms. Hearing this revolutionary song being played proudly in the theater, Yamamoto burst into tears with the men and women around him. Soon, the audience started to sing the song in unison. Yamamoto remembers this moment as a unique experience where "hundreds of viewers became one and sang as they wept." xi

Yamamoto's recollections suggest that Communist activists of the early 1950s did not hold realistic hopes of their struggle eventually gaining a mass base, but were rather driven by a shared pride in marginality and a sense of fatalistic duty—an outlook that many Communist troops who carried out the "military operation" in the imperial palace plaza probably held.

The May Day celebration provided these Communist troops with the opportunity to involve an unprecedented number of people into their "struggle." People who shunned illegal demonstrations under normal circumstances found themselves side by side with troops eager to shed blood in their military operation against the police.

The writer Sawachi Hisae, a twenty year old Waseda University student working at a publishing company, was one such participant. Writing forty seven years after the event, she recalls how she participated in the May Day demonstrations as one of the "masses":

May Day was a festive time. We didn't have to go to work that day...I was a *nonpoli* student conditioned to fear the "reds," but I naturally took part in May Day as part of the Publisher's Labor Union marchers.

The weather was fine that day. I was walking along casually

after eating my box lunch when I met a group of marchers from Waseda. A classmate said to me, "Sawachi-san, come over here."

So I parted with my colleagues and joined the Waseda group.

The group snaked danced and sang as they marched toward the police headquarters. They grew more spirited as they chanted slogans toward the building. "I think I was embarrassed and remained silent," she recalls.

We passed Sakuradamon and entered the plaza with lots of pine trees, the group gradually dissolved. "Ah, I'm tired," everyone was thinking, and we sat down on the grass. I thought the demonstration would end in the plaza. I didn't know the place was off-limits.

As we sat there relaxing, a battle cry arose. People came rushing towards us. I wondered what was going on but instinctively started running away. I exited the plaza from Babasaki gate and headed toward the Marunouchi district. I did not know what was happening but it was strange.

I ran out of breath and stopped beside the first building I saw...

Men and women from the demonstration were running for their lives. One man fell right in front of me. The chasing policeman with the steel helmet closed in brandishing his club with a veritably battle-like awfulness.

The man on the ground was defenseless. As the club swung down, his skull went "paka" and split open like a watermelon.

The man crouched down and fresh blood flowed forth like a waterfall. The men with the clubs ran by without a care, and there was a respite.

Fearing the man would die without medical attention, I led

him to a clinic in Yurakucho. I gave him all the money I had on me except what I needed for the transportation home, even though I thought that the small amount I gave would not be enough for the bill....

Sawachi returned to Waseda that day to attend classes. There were many bloodied students and the atmosphere was seething with fear and anger. She treated some injured students that day and went to work the next day "as if nothing had happened."

Sure, there might have been agitation from leftist elements. But there were many people who casually entered the imperial palace plaza without thinking of the place being off-limits, and who were caught completely off guard by the sudden battle cry. That's what it's like to be witness to history. ^{xii}

The writer's dispassionate description of the police's brutal tactics and the angry atmosphere at Waseda following the bloodshed complicates Umezaki's description of "normal" people siding with the demonstrators against the police as a result of the latter's indiscriminate brutality. Physical proximity on the battlefield did nothing to bridge the emotional gap between the Communist troops and this member of the "masses."

Conclusion

Bloody May Day brought home to participants the visceral experience of war-like combat. Communist troops clashing with the police in the plaza included men with wartime military training. Once the brawl started, they clashed with police using their martial skills acquired in the military. Long sticks became bayonets and short sticks daggers as they charged the police shouting battle cries. ^{xiii}

Student May Day participants belonged to a younger generation that

experienced the war as children. Asked to describe the scene at the plaza, a student replied, "There was just blood...the first thing I felt was blood." Another student commented, "I don't have any experience of war so I don't know, but that was the scene of a battlefield. I thought hand to hand combat on a plain must be something like that."^{xiv} Although war was a ubiquitous theme in intellectual discourse of the time, students' relationship to war had remained purely vicarious. Bloody May Day gave student participants what books and newsreels could not: a first-hand experience approximating actual military combat. The different ways in which students responded emotionally and intellectually to the bloodshed deserves further scrutiny in order to shed light on the political culture of university campuses and beyond during the early 1950s.

i *Asahi Shinbun*, April 28, 1952. Ibid., April 29, 1952, p.3

ii John Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p.554. *Asahi Shinbun*, November 22, 1972, p.22.

iii *Asahi Shinbun*, May 1, 1952 Evening Edition, p.1-2

iv *Asahi Shinbun*, May 2, 1952 p.1

v Umezaki Haruo, "Watashi wa mita," *Sekai*, July 1952, p.146-149

vi *Heiwa to dokuritsu no tame ni*, May 8, 1952, p.1

vii Masuyama Tarô, "'50 nen mondai' oboegaki," in Undôshikenkyôkai ed., *Undôshi kenkyô* v.8 (Tokyo: San'ichi shobô, 1981) p.120-125. Masuyama later found out that after the bureau meeting, a party leader was summoned to the Central headquarter and ordered to lead the demonstration into the imperial palace plaza.

viii Personal correspondence from Takizawa Rinzô to Miyachi Ken'ichi, July 9, 2003.

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See also Ide Magoroku, "Kaisô-1952 Chi no mède jiken," *Ekonomisuto*, July

1, 1986, p.81

ix Cited in *Asahi gurafu*, May 21, 1952, p.23

x *Tokyo daigaku gakusei shinbun*, May 1, 1952, p.1

xi Yamamoto Akira, *Sengo fûzokushi*, p.157-162

xii Sawachi Hisae, "Sawachi Hisae no mita "Ryuketsu no mêdê"" *Bungei Shunjû* (June 1999)

xiii *Asahi Gurafu*, May 21, 1952, p.7

xiv *Tokyo daigaku gakusei shinbun*, May 8, 1952, p.2