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Mark E. Caprio. "The Eagle has Landed: Groping for a Korean Role in the Pacific War."

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In "The Eagle has Landed," Mark Caprio asks whether "better handling of the Korean issue during World War II could have provided U.S. occupation forces with better circumstances to prepare southern Korea for a swift, and unified, independence" (5). He explores how Korean lobbying in the United States for support of the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) in Chungking, China resulted in a few attempts to train Korean exiles for service in Korea either before or after the war and then asks why the U.S. government failed to use any of these programs in a significant way in the fight against Japan or the subsequent occupation of Korea (18-19). The State Department defended this policy by arguing that 1) Korean exiles were disunited and 2) that supporting any single group or developing a new one would hamper Koreans' ability to choose a government for themselves after liberation (18-19). Caprio argues that, while the former was largely true, the latter justification was disingenuous. American plans for trusteeship in Korea would have deprived the Koreans of self-government anyway. Caprio claims that the U.S. government developed Korean exile groups only to their degree of usefulness in serving the American policy of trusteeship. He also argues that the U.S. marginalized any group that might have been strong enough to ally with a Korean "indigenous political body" in challenging American plans (24).

Caprio's article focuses exclusively on an Office of Strategic Service (OSS) project, codenamed "Eagle," to train Koreans in China for service in Korea. Despite being short of trained personnel, the Koreans of Eagle Project were marooned in China instead of being transported back to the Korean peninsula after the surrender of Japan. Caprio argues this was likely because of their loyalty to the KPG (24). The failure to use what meager Korean assets the United States possessed forced the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) to rely on Japanese and Japanese-trained Korean administrators, which energized the political left and contributed to post-liberation turmoil in southern Korea

(32). Caprio concludes that supporting the KPG was a viable alternative to working with former Japanese collaborators and would have given the U.S. the option of administering Korea indirectly through an indigenous regime, a strategy similar to that employed so well in Japan (32-33).

Historians and others have long known that Koreans in the United States, despite their small numbers, were “reasonably successful” at lobbying the U.S. government during World War II and that their efforts resulted in some support for Korea (13). As early as 1954, the biographer of longtime Korean exile leader and first president of the Republic of Korea (ROK) Syngman Rhee, mentioned such projects, though not by name.¹ Caprio’s article is the most comprehensive treatment of Eagle Project to date and succeeds at situating it in the broader context of American policy towards Korea during the war.² For that reason alone, Caprio’s article contributes much to scholars’ understanding of the Korean independence movement and its engagement with the United States during the war.

But the article suffers from a narrow source base. The Korean Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs (국가보훈처) has published two important collections of documents on the OSS’s Korean projects: *NAPKO Project of the OSS* and *OSS 재미한인자료* (Korean-American Materials of the OSS).³ These two collections comprise over 1500 pages of documents produced by various U.S. government agencies and highlight the complex nature of using Korean exiles during World War II. Though neither collection deals extensively with Eagle Project, NAPKO, as a sister project, was conceived to avoid some of the international difficulties (discussed below) that Eagle raised.⁴ These sources would have given greater depth to Caprio’s analysis.

Caprio is right to suggest the feasibility of recognizing the KPG, which might have expedited the American occupation of Korea, but he fails to elaborate the risks of such a policy. The KPG was the only Korean exile organization that claimed to be a government.

¹ Robert Oliver, *Syngman Rhee: The Man Behind the Myth*. (New York: Dodd Mead, 1954), 184–85.

² An article by Bill Steifer in the *American Intelligence Journal* also focuses on Eagle Project, but in the context of intra-OSS politics. See Steifer, Bill, “The OSS in Korea: Operation Eagle,” *American Intelligence Journal*, (March 2012), 33-38.

³ *OSS (Office of Strategic Service) 재미한인자료* (Seoul: 국가보훈처 [Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs], 2005); *NAPKO Project of OSS* (Seoul: 국가보훈처 [Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs], 2001).

⁴ Because NAPKO proposed landing Korean exile cells on the peninsula from the sea and then administering the cells from American-occupied Okinawa, it hoped to run a covert operation on the Korean peninsula without the international complications that cooperation with the Chinese involved, which are discussed below.

It also had a measure of legitimacy because of its roots in the March 1st Movement of 1919, the most important anti-colonial movement in Korea. But unfortunately the KPG was a hostage of nationalist China and its leader Jiang Jieshi. In November 1941, Jiang had forced Kim Ku, president of the KPG, to sign a nine-article agreement that effectively gave China operational control of the KPG armed forces. In return, the KPG received a small subsidy that was necessary to keep it afloat. The KPG leadership resented the agreement. They regarded it as part of a Chinese strategy to reestablish the dominance in Korea that China had lost in the 1890s. KPG Foreign Minister Cho So-ang warned American diplomats of Chinese intentions, hoping that such a warning would motivate the U.S. to rescue the KPG from Jiang and safeguard Korea's independence.⁵

The KPG warning did not have the desired effect. Rather, it made the Americans suspicious of Chinese intentions toward Korea. When Chungking suggested that both China and the U.S. recognize the KPG in April 1942, the State Department demurred. The Department suspected the Chinese were luring the United States into an attempt to “nip in the bud the development of any Soviet-supported Korean group.”⁶ The Americans and the Chinese both understood that the Soviet army in the Far East contained “two or three” regiments of Soviet Koreans poised to march into Korea if the USSR entered the war against Japan.⁷ The Chinese apparently hoped to overcome this Soviet advantage by securing U.S. support for the KPG. But this was too great a gamble from the American perspective. U.S. recognition of the KPG risked alienating a necessary Russian ally in the war against Japan. Recognition might also end up enabling Chinese domination of Korea in the postwar period. Secretary of State Cordell Hull told the Chinese that, while the United States could not recognize the KPG at that time, the U.S. did not “desire to stand in the way” of Chungking taking any action it thought wisest.⁸ Tellingly, Chungking dropped the issue and did not recognize the KPG.

⁵ Ambassador Gauss to Secretary of State Hull, 12 February 1942, 895.01/81 *대한민국임시정부자료집* [*Documents of the Korean Provisional Government*] vol. 26 (국사편찬위원회 [National Institute of Korean History], 2008), 21–22. It is unclear when exactly the State Department received a text of this agreement. When the Military Intelligence Service passed a copy along to the State Department in December 1942, officers in the Division of Far Eastern Affairs claimed they had already seen and studied it. See William Langdon's memo attached to Roy P. McNair, Military Attaché, American Embassy, Chungking China to the Chief of the Military Intelligence Service, 11 December 1942, 895.01/228 *Ibid.*, 187–88.

⁶ Secretary of State Hull to President Roosevelt, 29 April 1942, 895.01/99, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1942*, vol. I (Government Printing Office, 1960), 873.

⁷ Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs T.V. Soong's memorandum for President Roosevelt on the Korean situation, 8 April 1945, 895.01/96 1/3, 美國務省韓國關係文書 (*Internal affairs of Korea, 1940-1944*), vol. I (Seoul: 原主文化社 [Wonju Cultural Association], 1993), 514–17.

⁸ Secretary Hull to Ambassador Gauss, 1 May 1942, 895.01/99, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1942*, 1:873–75.

After learning the nature of the KPG's predicament, American diplomats realized there were few chances for an independent Korea to emerge during the postwar period. Even if Korea was freed from Japan, which in 1942 was still far from certain, China and the Soviet Union seemed likely to compete for its control. That Koreans were ill-equipped to resist their neighbors was equally evident. Confidential minutes from a Council on Foreign Relations meeting, passed to the State Department by Stanley Hornbeck, laid out five possible postwar outcomes for Korea, which included remaining part of Japan and becoming independent. Participants at the meeting believed the latter would make Korea "subject to easy conquest."⁹ The State Department's Korea expert, William R. Langdon, had come to the same conclusion. In a February 1942 memo, he argued for an "international commission" to assist in the administration of Korea after the war because of the "inexperience and defencelessness" of the Koreans. Langdon noted that without such assistance, the Koreans would be subject to "reconquest."¹⁰

In the midst of political and diplomatic uncertainty, trusteeship for Korea seemed to offer the best chance of achieving a number of U.S. war aims and postwar ambitions. Trusteeship would remove Korea as an object of contention between the Allies, at least until the war's conclusion, and allow them to focus on defeating Japan. The policy would also provide Koreans with the best opportunity to maintain their independence over the long term by balancing the interests of Korea's neighbors in the short term. Creating an independent Korea was not an altruistic objective for the United States. As the Pacific War had shown, regional wars in Asia could affect the United States, and any of the likely scenarios for the war's end would keep the United States significantly involved in the region for some time. An independent Korea was important to the peace of East Asia. The odds that trusteeship would result in a unified and independent Korea were long, but at least trusteeship would serve the purpose of Allied unity in the short term.

Syngman Rhee, Kim Ku, and nearly all other Korean leaders abhorred trusteeship. Rhee peppered U.S. officials with requests to recognize the KPG, arguing that not doing so was to surrender Korea to control by Soviet-trained Koreans. The result would be a civil war between Korean nationalists and communists. American diplomats did not disagree with Rhee's analysis. But as U.S. Ambassador to China Clarence Gauss explained in a memo to Secretary Hull, he did not believe that U.S. recognition of the KPG "would prevent the situation [Rhee] anticipates."¹¹ Nothing could stop the Soviets from occupying Korea after

⁹ Stanley K. Hornbeck to Secretary of State Welles, April 1942, 895.01/96 2/3, *美國務省韓國關係文書 (Internal affairs of Korea, 1940-1944)*, VI, 1:521-22.

¹⁰ Memo, "Some Aspects of the Question of Korean Independence", 20 February 1942, 895.01/79, *대한민국임시정부자료집 [Documents of the Korean Provisional Government]*, vol. 20 (국사편찬위원회 [National Institute of Korean History], 2007), 186-204.

¹¹ Syngman Rhee to Ambassador Clarence E. Gauss with a memorandum attached, 18 October 1943, 895.01/705, *대한민국임시정부자료집 [Documents of the Korean Provisional Government]*, 26:270-71.

they entered the war against Japan, but perhaps a trusteeship agreement would prevent them from permanently occupying the peninsula.

Caprio's argument that the U.S. refused to make better use of Korean exiles for fear they might damage plans for trusteeship is correct, but his assumption that U.S. support for trusteeship was at odds with the American commitment to "liberate" Korea after the war is questionable (24). To be sure, American paternalism was clear in the policy of trusteeship. But the policy was based on other assumptions than Korea's need of instruction and guidance in administering a government. Trusteeship was also based on the sense that Koreans were incapable of defending themselves from either Soviet or Chinese assertions of influence in the immediate postwar era. American officials believed that trusteeship offered the best chance to 'liberate' Korea, not an alternative to it. American policymakers can rightly be criticized for not having been better prepared for the occupation of Korea, but prior to August 1945 it is hard to criticize them for wavering in their attitude towards the KPG.

These criticisms aside, Caprio's assertion that the KPG presented a way to "offset the deficiencies of U.S. military rule in southern Korea" after September 1945 is a provocative one. (33) By that time, circumstances had changed drastically. With problems at home and two different communist armies between him and Korea, Jiang Jieshi probably could not have reasserted China's position in Korea, or even maintained his influence over the KPG, if the U.S. had moved the KPG to Seoul. Soviet actions in Central and Eastern Europe had also given a reasonable indication of how territory under Soviet occupation would fare. The possibility for a unified Korea under trusteeship looked unlikely, especially considering the Koreans' opposition to the policy. Finally, intelligence gathering on the ground in Korea revealed that the KPG had real support among Koreans. The State Department's first political adviser on the ground reported that conservative Koreans were unanimous in their support for the KPG. Even Korean radicals were embracing KPG stalwarts such as Rhee and Kim, though likely with ulterior motives.¹² After only a few weeks in Korea, Langdon, one of the architects of trusteeship, abandoned the policy in favor of recognizing the KPG, reasoning that Koreans regarded it as a quasi-official government anyway.¹³ The OSS's Korean affairs officer submitted a similar assessment.¹⁴ In December 1945, General Douglas MacArthur joined the chorus of those

¹² Benninghoff to Secretary Byrnes, 15 September 1945, 740.00119 Control (Japan)/9-1545; Benninghoff to Secretary Byrnes 29 September 1945, 895.00/9-2945, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945*, vol. VI (Government Printing Office, 1969), 1050, 1061.

¹³ William Langdon to Secretary Byrnes, 20 November 1945, 740.00119 Control (Korea) /11-2145: Telegram, *Ibid.*, VI:1131.

¹⁴ Clarence N. Weems, Jr. "Korea and the Provision Government," 28 September 1945, *OSS (Office of Strategic Service) 재미한인자료*, 274-86.

wanting to abandon trusteeship.¹⁵ The momentum for recognizing the KPG was never greater.

While many of these analysts would have agreed with Caprio that recognizing the KPG would have made the task of creating an independent South Korea easier, the creation of an independent South Korea was not yet the objective. American policymakers clung to trusteeship because it alone held out hope, albeit very slim, for a reunified and independent Korea.¹⁶ Recognition of the KPG was a viable strategy only if the U.S. was willing to accept that trusteeship was dead, that the division of Korea was permanent, and that the U.S. would be blamed for it. Had the U.S. recognized the KPG in the fall of 1945, the Soviets would have had an earlier opportunity to accuse the Americans of violating the trusteeship agreement by setting up a separate government in the South. Of course supporting a separate government in the South eventually became American policy, but by the time that decision was made the KPG was no longer in existence. It disbanded in January of 1946.¹⁷

The remote possibility exists that U.S. recognition of the KPG at any point during World War II or immediately after liberation would have forged a united Korean movement. This was Rhee's opinion. He told the State Department that most Korean communists were not ideologically committed to communism and only embraced it because the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party had offered them assistance against the Japanese. If the U.S. recognized the KPG as a government and gave it sufficient aid to create an effective fighting force, Rhee claimed, Koreans in Manchuria and Siberia would flock to it.¹⁸ "Recognize our government and we will present a unified front," Rhee and other Korean leaders repeatedly told the OSS.¹⁹ Had it been recognized, the KPG might have had enough prestige, legitimacy, and support to withstand Soviet (and American) assertions of influence after the war, and the Korean peninsula might have remained unified and become independent. But for the reasons described above this would have been one hell of a gamble, especially prior to the Japanese surrender.

¹⁵ Gen. Douglas MacArthur to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 16 December 1945, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945*, VI:1144-48.

¹⁶ James Irving Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941-1950* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 61-74.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁸ Syngman Rhee to Frank P. Lockhard, 25 July 1945, Young-ick Lew, ed., *The Syngman Rhee Correspondence in English, 1904-1948*, vol. 1 (Institute for Modern Korean Studies - Yonsei University, 2009), 545-47.

¹⁹ "Unification of Korean Independence Groups," 15 June 1942, *OSS (Office of Strategic Service) 재미 한인자료*, 142-51.

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Caprio's argument depends on a series of counterfactuals. Given the division of Korea and the danger that divide still poses to the region — as well as the global community— such counterfactuals are worth exploring, and Caprio deserves credit for raising them. He is right to argue that recognizing the KPG was a feasible option, but he overlooks the very serious risks that such an action would have entailed. Whatever one's opinion of Caprio's argument and the assumptions on which it rests, at least one conclusion seems irrefutable: somewhere, smiling down from above, or perhaps up from below, is the soul of Syngman Rhee, delighted that scholars have even countenanced the feasibility of the very policy that he tirelessly advocated for much of his forty-year exile in the United States.

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