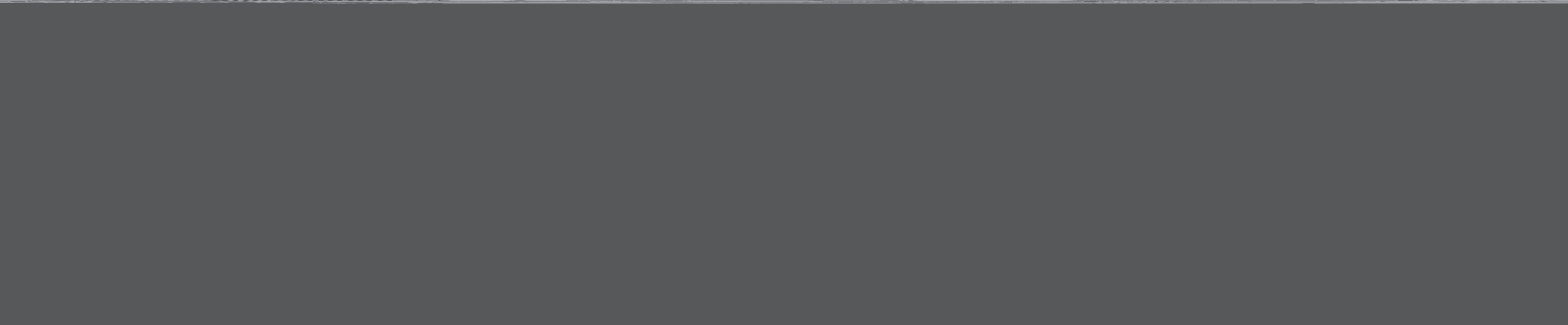




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Christian F. Ostermann, Series Editor

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COLD WAR I

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SYNGMAN RHEE: SOCIALIST ¹

“Communism is cholera and you cannot compromise with cholera” is the title of a speech by Syngman Rhee in 1950. [1]

² To his critics his anti-communism lies at the root of the reactionary politics that fostered the division of Korea and suppressed a leftist social revolution on the peninsula. In the name of anticommunism, the Republic of Korea’s attempts at fostering democracy were dashed and the state morphed into military dictatorship. The myth then of Rhee being a right-wing anticommunist has been beneficial to both sides. But is it true? By 1950, Syngman Rhee held explicitly communist views, but were these the views that he held his whole life? Was anticommunism really at Rhee’s ideological core? Is anticommunism the same as right-wing politics?

This paper will make two claims that run counter to much of the received wisdom about Syngman Rhee’s political beliefs. First, it will argue that Syngman Rhee’s politics for most of his life were left-of-center at least according to the American understanding of the terms “left” and “right.” In fact Rhee’s beliefs for much of his life would have resonated more with the ideals of left-wing social democracy than with right-wing freemarket capitalism. Second, it will argue Rhee’s anticommunism was more instrumental than philosophical. In fact, for much of his life, it would be more accurate to describe Rhee as Soviet rather than anticommunist. Finally, it will suggest that the most salient aspect of Rhee’s ideology was his commitment to Korean independence, a commitment that lasted his whole life since he believed that a divided Korea was not an independent Korea. Nearly everything in his mind was subordinated to this. This was

his one consistent ideological test. Would any ~~right~~ ideology, politics, or strategy further the cause of Korean independence?

The title of this paper is somewhat misleading. It will not argue that Rhee was in fact a socialist. However, it will argue that labeling Rhee a socialist would actually be a ~~more~~ accurate description of his politics for most of his life than labeling him a ~~right~~ anti-communist. To make this argument, I will look at three topics: Rhee's associates, his writings, and his policies.

RHEE'S ASSOCIATES

One of the most surprising ~~discoveries~~ discoveries divulged by Rhee's diary, published in 2015, was how many of his friends, associates, and influences were ~~of the~~ center or even socialist. The American missionaries who were responsible for Rhee's western education were theologically conservative, but they were also social reformers³ It was through them that Rhee first encountered socialistic thought. During his five years of imprisonment, Rhee's missionary friends kept him well stocked with various reading materials including Lyman Abott's ~~skye~~ magazine The Outlook⁴ In his excellent study of Rhee's experience in prison, Professor Chong sik Lee devotes several pages to describing the importance of The ~~Outlook~~ Outlook's intellectual

cause of social reform. Abbott's socialism emphasized the gradual transformation of government and industry beyond the "wage system" and into an economic arrangement where the "spirit of brotherhood" taught by Jesus Christ would become a reality. In a 1908 editorial on socialism, Abbott made a key distinction between what he called democratic socialism and state socialism. What Abbott calls state socialism in this editorial is more akin to communism, with the means of production and all property communally owned and all workers employed by the state. Abbott condemned this type of socialism as impractical and also unjust, as he believed workers would be deprived of the freedom to choose their vocation and better themselves until they reached their full potential as human beings. Democratic socialism on the other hand, was evolutionary; ownership of most property would remain in private hands, but the state would intervene to

The Passing Show of Capitalism¹⁶

audiences by including Rhee's biography in his book *The New Era in Asia*. Rhee publicly joined the Socialist Party of America in 1931. Robert T. Oliver claims that Norman Thomas, the perennial socialist presidential candidate, was an ardent supporter of the Korean cause and this is supported by Thomas' letters to the Korean Commission.²² He was one of the few American socialist who publicly supported Rhee and the American intervention in the Korean war.²³ Senator William Langer, who spoke out passionately against surrendering Korea to the Soviet Union on the Senate floor in 1945 had been part of the leftist Pro-People's League in the 1920s. That Rhee would keep company with left-center Americans is hardly surprising given the historical context of race relations in the United States with the left generally being less exclusionary than the right. However, what drew Rhee to these individuals was not their racial politics, nor their socialism. It was rather that he was willing to assist him in his struggle for Korean independence. Their socialism may or may not have been a point of attraction for Rhee but it certainly was no barrier to partnership.

RHEE'S WRITINGS

Over his lifetime, Rhee produced a prodigious body of writing, much of it correspondence and

Korea of his birth average Koreans, no matter how talented, had to consider “fools and idiots of noble blood as their superiors.” He wondered how much human capital was wasted because of such prejudice. Had Rhee stopped there, this ~~could~~ be an endorsement of communism. Many ideologies, including capitalism, could make the same critique of rigid caste systems. But Rhee continued that while systems such as the Joseon caste system were disappearing, new forms of slavery were taking thei

inspiration from the Weimar constitution.³³

Rhee's first Liberation Day speech as president in 1948 contained similar ideas about social welfare: "The employer must not, and will not be permitted to exploit labor. Labor must not expect, and will not be permitted to destroy capital." Rhee argued that the goal of his administration was to elevate the living standards of all Koreans, but to do so without pitting one class against another, as the communists did. In the same speech he continued to make distinctions between those who supported the economics of communism and those who supported Soviet communism. "We are not so much against communism as against the treason of its devotees," she told his audience.³⁴

Although progress was halting and Korean living standards would take decades to rise significantly, Rhee would remake Korea's social fabric through a major land reform program in the 1950s. This land reform is possibly the most significant policy of Rhee's tenure as president of the Republic of Korea, and yet it is frequently overlooked. This is partially because the land reform took years to execute and was plagued by mismanagement. Nearly every aspect of Rhee's administration was. Loopholes in the law allowed some land owners to hang on to large swaths of their property by recategorizing it or by incorporating it with an institution whose land was exempt from the reform, such as a school.³⁵ Rhee's land reform was also interrupted by the Korean War, which meant that it was not fully implemented until the late 1950s. Initially this land reform seemed to compare unfavorably with similar land reforms undertaken in North Korea and China because the landlords were compensated; the tenants had to pay for the land in installments over five years; and the process of redistribution took years. Rhee's land reform was indeed less radical. It was also more complex. Because it was undertaken within a system of private ownership and under the auspices of a democratic government, in 1949 and 1950 Rhee was far from all-powerful—Rhee's land reform had to go through painstaking legislative and budgetary processes. The fact that many Korean legislators also large landholders did not surprise

make the process any easier. Such assemblymen both attempted to delay the bill and increase

that would “continue the present socialized status” of the Korean economy.⁴⁰ Rhee could not deny these claims, but rather defended himself by claiming the government wanted to divest itself of most of these properties but was forced to hang on to them to prevent them from being sold at rock bottom prices. Rhee believed he had a responsibility to see that sources of “national strength” did not fall into the hands of the “old ~~ind~~ class.”⁴¹ This was hardly reassuring to American free market ideologues. It did not help that one of Rhee’s cabinet

reactionary nor as right-wing as is often supposed, then it is necessary to look beyond the left right paradigm to discover the ideas, fears, and aspirations that divided Koreans during this period and, when augmented by international intrigue, kept the ongoing Korean War.

