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WARTIME DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD IN JAPAN

Description

An analysis of Japanese wartime food distribution, describing the Foodstuffs Control Corporation and its functions; rationing techniques; black markets.

24 March 1945

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INTRODUCTION

Since the outbreak of the Pacific war, Japan has devoted considerable attention to achieving a smooth distribution of foodstuffs. Stringent measures have been necessitated by the fact that Japan imports twenty percent of her food supply. Measures to increase the self-sufficiency of the home islands have been pushed in the face of the probable loss of her overseas sources of food. An important part of the program of self-sufficiency in food is an efficient system of distribution of available food supplies. Thus far there is no indication that the supply of food is insufficient. In fact, the food program includes a substantial allowance for storage against emergencies and it will be shown below what provisions are being made to store food.

THE BEGINNINGS OF WARTIME FOOD CONTROL

Rationing of consumers' goods in Japan began in 1940 on a local basis when individual cities attempted to regulate the distribution of limited supplies. By the end of 1940, 4,826 localities were using the ticket system for rice, 649 for dairy products, 399 for wheat and wheat flour, 19 for sake, 40 for bean paste, 24 for noodles, and 8 for soy. At the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor nearly all foods were rationed on a ticket basis by town authorities.

National rationing of food was instituted in 1940 with sugar under the Minister of Commerce and Industry. However, the administration of the rations was left to local authorities and practices differed considerably. The card system was used in the cities, but not in the country. The actual quota per person varied in different localities. The distri-

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bution of other foodstuffs was controlled by various devices such as limiting allotments to wholesalers.

It need hardly be said that rice is the most important food in the Japanese diet. It accounts for a half to two-thirds of the total number of calories consumed. Rice was controlled in 1939 under the Rice Distribution Control enacted in April of that year. The Japan Rice Company, a semi-official organization, was established in July 1939 and began functioning in October. In August 1940 a Rice Distribution Ordinance was promulgated, which provided the following:

1. All rice produced by the farmers and rice sold by landlords to be placed under the control of the Agricultural Union of that city or village.
2. All rice purchased by the Agricultural Unions of villages and towns to be sold to the Rice-Selling Group of the province, prefecture, or district.
3. All rice stored or hoarded by merchants to be sold to the Rice Grains Control Board of the province, prefecture or district.
4. Within the province, prefecture, and district all rice to be controlled by their respective Rice Grain Control Boards and the District Trade Federation.
5. The surplus rice in all district granaries or agricultural unions to be sold by the District Rice Federation.
6. The rice of the District Rice Grain Control Board in excess of the requirements for consumption, to be sold to the Government or the Japan Rice Grains Company.
7. The Japan Rice Grains Company could sell rice to the

Government or to the Rice Grains Control Board of the provinces, prefectures, or districts.

Under these rules rice consumption was not uniform among the various provinces, prefectures or districts and only the surplus stocks were controlled on a national scale. Only after the beginning of war with the United States was the control of rice and other staple foods organized on a national basis.

THE FOODSTUFFS CONTROL CORPORATION

Early in 1942 the Imperial Diet passed the Food Control Bill which superceded eight previous laws concerning food distribution, including the Rice Control Laws. The new law had three purposes: (1) to strengthen the national control system of staple foods, (2) to readjust their distribution system and (3) to store up food against emergencies. The Bill provides for complete control of rice, barley, rye and wheat and a partial monopoly of other foods. In the Spring of 1944 potatoes were brought under the system. Plans were being made to distribute all fresh vegetables through the same channels, but apparently this was not found feasible since no fresh foods as yet are distributed under the machinery set up by the Food Control Bill.

Under the Bill the entire production of the staple foods over and above the farmers' needs for household use and for seed is bought up by the Government through the Prefectural Industrial Federations and the National Purchase and Sales Federations.¹ It is then distributed

¹ Under new regulations set up in May 1944, rice quotas were set for the farmers to be turned over to the Foodstuffs Control Corporation. Any production above the quota could be retained by the farmer for home consumption or sold to the Foodstuffs Control Corporation at premium prices.

through the Central and Local Foodstuffs Control Corporations ("Chuo and Chiho Shokuryo-Eidan"), which handle the storing and distribution. The Central Foodstuffs Control Corporation, after providing for the needs of the armed forces, sells to the Local Corporations. The latter, however, are under the administrative control of the local prefectural governors rather than of the Central Corporation.

The Central Foodstuffs Control Corporation began operating in September 1942 with a capital of 100 million yen, of which 50 million was provided by the Government. The remainder was composed of the capital of the leading food organizations and their member firms. Included among these are the Japan Rice Company, the National Federation of Rice Merchants' Guilds, the Japan Wheat Industrial Federation, and the Japan Vermicelli Manufacturers' Association. The main office is at Tokyo and the Minister of Agriculture and Commerce¹ is the supervisor. The Minister of Agriculture and Commerce appoints a so-called Promotion Committee to draw up corporation statutes and manage organizational affairs. General policies concerning food distribution are determined by the Cabinet Planning Board, as re-organized in October 1944, and carried out by the Foodstuffs Control Corporation as set up by the Food Control Bill.

The Central Foodstuffs Control Corporation was operated by personnel drawn from the staffs of the food organizations, which it incorporated. The Local Foodstuffs Control Corporations are combinations of local guilds of rice, barley and other traders in cereals, wheat

1 In the Cabinet re-organization of November 1943 the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry were combined to form the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce.

flour distribution organs, vermicelli wholesale dealers, and bread distribution bodies. Their capital, as in the case of the five corporations forming the Central Foodstuffs Control Corporation, has been converted as their contributions to the new organization. Prefectural federations of trade guilds also make contributions. Half of the capital of the Local Foodstuffs Control Corporations are taken up by the Central Foodstuffs Control Corporation. There are offices in all the prefectures and in Karafuto. The Tokyo District Foodstuffs Control Corporation was set up in Tokyo with a capital of ten million yen.

The Local Corporations distribute essential foods to the consumers through the neighborhood associations ("tonari gumi").¹ Consumers must give up ration coupons when they buy such foods, and the coupons are distributed to them through the local police. Twice a year family investigations are made by the neighborhood association covering names of all members of the family, their sex, date of birth and occupation, births, deaths, marriages and members drafted or mobilized for labor service. The rationing of daily necessities is carried out on the basis of these statistics. Consumers who eat in restaurants must present "eating out" ration tickets.

Besides distributing essential foods, the Central Foodstuffs Control Corporation stores them. It may also process and manufacture them. Part of the wheat bought by the Government, for example, is used in the manufacture of bean paste and soy sauce. The portion which is allotted for direct consumption is bought before cleaning by the Central Foodstuffs Control Corporation, which cleans it or has it made on

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1 A neighborhood association consists of approximately ten families and is headed by a president appointed by the police or chosen by the members of the association with the approval of the police.

commission into flour and vermicelli for distribution among the general consumers through the Local Foodstuffs Control Corporation. Existing flour mills have lost their independent status and have become flour makers on a commission basis. Barley and rye are distributed in the same way. Sweet and white potatoes are handled by the Central Foodstuffs Corporation, but are not distributed as such. They are turned over to the flour mills to be mixed with wheat. The Central Foodstuffs Control Corporation also purchases potato starch from the Japan Starch Company and turns it over to the flour mills for admixture with wheat flour.

The new method of distribution of food had important effects on food dealers. Most heavily affected were wholesale and retail dealers in sweet and white potatoes, wheat flour, vermicelli, bread and cereals who were not incorporated into the new system and hence were prohibited from dealing in these items. Provisions had to be made for these small traders who had to enter new lines of business in the form of a government fund to purchase their equipment or establishment and to grant them relief.

DISTRIBUTION OF SUGAR

The control of sugar distribution was extremely tight, even as early as 1940. This was necessitated by the fact that about 85 percent of the sugar consumption of Japan is imported. The present system of sugar rationing was set up in 1943. The total production of sugar in Japan and imports from the Empire and other countries are turned over to the Japan Sugar Control Corporation, which operates under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce. Branches are maintained at Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, Otaru and Shimonoseki. From these branches the sugar

is distributed to the Japan Sugar Association, which is a sales organization which also has branches in Hokkaido, East Japan, Central Japan, Kansai and West Japan. These branches deliver the sugar to the wholesale associations and co-operative societies. Each of the forty-seven prefectures has one wholesale association and one co-operative society. The former handles the distribution to the wholesale dealers in the cities and the latter to the co-operative societies in the rural regions. From these the sugar goes to the retail stores or individual co-operatives and from there to the consumer. The consumer receives his sugar ration on the basis of coupons issued by the communities. The community obtains the power to issue coupons from the prefecture and works under the direction of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce.

Business requirements are handled separately. (1) For small business organizations, the prefectural authorities issue purchase coupons, in accordance with the directives of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce. These small shops, such as bakeries and inns and small vendors who prepare food for households, purchase their sugar either from the wholesalers or retailers. (2) Large manufacturers, such as cookie manufacturers, obtain their coupons directly from the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce and purchase the sugar either from the Japan Sugar Association or the wholesale association. In April 1944 the Japan Sugar Control Corporation and the Japan Sugar Association were combined to simplify administration. Beginning about the same time attempts were begun to reduce the number of wholesale and retail outlets for food and other consumers' goods. In Osaka, for example, 1,000 retailers were eliminated in July. The plan was to have only one retail store for every 1,000 families in Osaka, one for each 400 in the suburbs and one

for each village.

DISTRIBUTION OF FISH AND OTHER FOODS

Foods other than staples do not fall under any national rationing plan. In the case of nearly all foods prefectural or local rationing prevails; however, the per capita allowance is not a fixed quantity. Such foods are distributed at irregular intervals by public announcement. For each such distribution special ration stamps or tickets are validated which can be used to obtain only the specific ration in question. Usually vegetables are distributed once every two days and fish once every four days. On the intervening days other foods may be distributed, e.g., seaweed, dehydrated eggs, etc.

The position of fish in the Japanese diet corresponds to that of meat in Western diet. Fish and all other marine products have been controlled and rationed since early 1942 by fish control associations under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce. Salted and dried fish are the most important items under control. Salted salmon and salmon-trout are purchased by the Japan Salted Salmon Control Association and then sold according to rationing regulations or stored against emergencies. There are over 120 destination points for fish shipments throughout the country, but the distribution to consumers is on the basis of seven consumption regions with the six big cities -- Tokyo, Osaka, Yokohama, Kyoto, Kobe, and Nagoya -- and Northern Kyushu as distribution centers. Every ken becomes one unit and authorized retailers are designated by the Government.

The method of rationing varies in each of the cities. The flow of food to the large cities was poor, and in the summer of 1944 an

attempt was made to increase food shipments to the large cities. The food control agencies were authorized to pay prices high enough to cover transportation costs. The food is then sold to retailers at a three percent commission. Retailers in turn add their commission and sell to consumers. In Tokyo and Osaka the control agencies are: the Tokyo Fresh Fruits Control Company, the Tokyo Marine Products Control Company, the Osaka Fresh Fruits Control Company and the Osaka Fish Control Company. In Tokyo, 5,600 new supply stations were set up to handle distribution of food, including fish, vegetables and meat to retail outlets.

THE ROLE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

As shown above, the neighborhood association handles the rationing of staple foods to consumers. In addition to staple foods certain other foods may be distributed. For example, according to the annual report of one neighborhood association the following items were handled: dehydrated eggs, dried radishes, fermented soy beans, vinegar and sauces. Special rationing may be carried out through neighborhood associations. For example, in February 1944 a special ration of whale meat was carried out through neighborhood associations. The neighborhood associations use as rationing stations the facilities of retail stores, co-operative stores or department stores or a particular market may be set up.

WEAKNESSES IN THE RATIONING ORGANIZATION

Despite tight control over food distribution, illegal operations are quite widespread. Nearly all goods may be bought without ration tickets at exorbitant prices. Representatives of black markets canvass residential sections soliciting sales and inquiring needs. Govern-

ment authorities have made constant appeals to the population to try to live within the legal ration. The Japanese authorities have failed to impress consumers with the moral offense which black market dealings involve. Most people who have the means and the opportunity to supplement his rations by buying in the black market do not hesitate to do so even if they are law-abiding citizens in all other respects.

One of the most serious sources of diversion of food into the black market is the basic difficulty of policing a large number of small farms. Farmers are legally permitted to retain enough produce for their own consumption and there is little to prevent them from retaining crops in excess of their needs and selling at lucrative prices to unofficial¹ buyers. To combat this official prices to farmers have been increased, but without adequate enforcement this simply tends to raise the illegal prices. Farmers have been withholding their produce in sufficient quantities to give or sell to their friends in the cities. So many city residents were going out to the country to obtain extra food that a regulation was passed prohibiting the carrying of food on passenger trains. Nevertheless, at the end of 1944 it was reported that 40,000 people daily in Tokyo alone obtained food in this manner.

During 1944 certain large firms in Japan adopted the practice of sending out their own agents to the country to obtain subsidiary food for their employees. This was not only an evasion of rationing regulations but it also was an evasion of wage controls. Justice Minister Matsuzaka

1 By means of subsidies prices to consumers have been held down.

declared it to be a criminal offense, and some purchasing agents in Tokyo were arrested. The firms argued that regular rations did not provide workers with an adequate diet and that extra rations were required to maintain the health and productivity of the workers.

Another serious abuse of rationing regulations involves the so-called "ghost population". Families may deliberately fail to report reductions in the size of the family through moving, military service or death and collect extra rations including rice as long as their false statements are undiscovered. One newspaper estimated that Tokyo had a ghost population of 200,000. In April 1944 regulations were passed imposing fines up to 1000 yen and imprisonment up to a year. No arrests were made, however. Sometimes extra rice rations are illegally obtained by misrepresentation of employment status. A person employed in office work may claim to be a heavy worker and thereby obtain extra rations. Still another known method of obtaining extra rations illegally is by maintaining residence in more than one place and collecting rations from different neighborhood associations.

It is interesting to note that many of these violations could not be carried out without the knowledge and even co-operation of local rationing authorities. It has even been reported that policemen sometimes serve as intermediaries between consumers and black market sources. It is difficult to see why the neighborhood associations should not be so familiar with their districts that bogus populations could not arise. It is equally difficult to see how large firms can send agents out to the country to buy up food in large quantities without the knowledge of the food authorities.

When rationing offenses are uncovered, they are often not punished. For the cases that are tried, penalties are light. Early in 1943 many penalties for rationing violations were made lighter by the Supreme Court. The following principles were to be applied:

1. The Supreme Court may pass judgment on the first or second attempts at violating the ration regulations on the basis of environment and the physical condition of the defendant and may sometimes reduce the length of imprisonment to a probationary period.

2. The Supreme Court may consider old age, patriotism and the good social reputation of a defendant.

3. The Supreme Court may lighten the punishment on the basis of motive and degree of violation.

Late in 1944 the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, in an attempt to improve the rationing system, established within the Ministry a Food Administration Investigation Commission. In general, it was felt that national rationing plans and policies were not being carried out by the local authorities and the plan remained an academic one. In an extraordinary session of Parliament 100,000 yen was appropriated for the investigation. The Commission was composed of members chosen from academic circles, private industry, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce. A thousand investigation reporters covered the six large cities and agricultural districts to report rationing problems. When necessary a representative was out as a consultant to try to improve a particular situation or conferences were held in those regions where problems existed. At the same time a ration conference was organized within the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce to make rationing plans

in conjunction with the department chiefs. All important problems are referred to this conference. The Food Administration Investigation Commission reported that there were about a million illegal peddlers throughout Japan in 1944. Moreover, the Commission found that most men entering the armed forces failed to report their change in status to the rationing authorities. Beginning in March 1945, therefore, when a man appears for induction he must present a certificate of notification from the rationing authorities showing that his change in status has been reported.

CONCLUSION

The Japanese food distribution organization is based on a system of cartel-like control associations, private or semi-public. They are entrusted with the task of carrying out the food distribution policies of the Japanese national and local government. In the case of staple foods, control of distribution is vested in the semi-public Foodstuffs Control Corporation, which involves a high degree of centralization. The Foodstuffs Control Corporation distributes food to consumers through neighborhood associations while the private control associations operate through regular wholesale and retail outlets. Although all the leaks have not been closed and black markets are quite widespread, the present organization achieves a reasonably smooth flow of food, and there is no evidence to show that the existing system will not continue to operate effectively in the future.