



The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War: The Untold History

by Monica Kim.

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Given the substantial historiography on the Korean conflict (1950–53), it can no longer be called the “Forgotten War.”¹ That said, there remain many blind spots in the coverage of the war. One concerns the treatment of North Korean and Chinese POWs detained by the United Nations Command (UNC). The POW issue figured prominently in the armistice negotiations, especially the harsh conditions captured UN soldiers suffered in North Korea and China. By contrast, little has been written on the psychological warfare the UNC waged against “enemy” POWs.² Historian Monica Kim (New York Univ.) seeks to correct this imbalance in *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War*.

Kim explores the repatriation of POWs during the Korean War through the lens of the post-1945 decolonization process. She analyzes the Korean conflict as a civil war driven by the American “liberal” imperialist project in Asia (10). During the war, the UNC, led by the Americans, detained over 170,000 soldiers of the Korea People’s Army and the People’s Volunteer Army of the People’s Republic of China. American and Korean military authorities and the Indian-led Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission gave these captives a choice of “voluntary repatriation” to North Korea or China, remaining in South Korea, or transferral to a neutral country. This had a major impact on conditions of detention and constituted a new form of warfare, where battle was “waged over human interiority” (7). In other words, Kim suggests that soldiers’ minds and psyches became the new battlefield.

At stake in this conflict was not simply the usual question of territorial sovereignty and the nation-state. The heart of the struggles revolved around the question of political recognition, the key rational dynamic that formed the foundation for the post-1945 nation-state system. This book argues that if we want to understand how the act of recognition became the essential terrain of war, we must step away from the traditional landscape of warfare—the battlefield—and into the interrogation room. (5)

Kim argues that the post-imprisonment choice of destination made by thousands of POWs validated the political recognition of different postcolonial systems, specifically, that of communist regimes, liberal US military occupiers of South Korea, and Indian “neutrals.” Interrogators thus became central actors in a new type of warfare that set the Korean War in the context of the post-Japanese colonial legacies and the US imperial project in the Pacific. The author deconstructs the traditional narrative of the binary—Washington vs. Moscow—Cold War confronta-

1. See Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (NY: Modern Library, 2013) 205–23.

2. See, however, David Cheng Chang, *The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War* (Stanford: Stanford U Pr, 2019); Susan Carruthers, *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2009); and Charles S. Young, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number: Exploiting Korean War POWs at Home and Abroad* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2014).

tion. The interrogation rooms in both North and South Korean POW camps “revealed multiple visions and interpretations of the project of decolonization and its relation to another project—modern warfare” (16).

To see the Korean War “through the prism of the interrogation rooms” (17), Kim adduces an impressive variety of US, UN, and Red Cross archival materials. These range from bureaucratic documents to diplomatic papers, including Red Cross visit reports, Psychological Strategy Board documents, Counterintelligence Corps files, and technical papers, manuals, and interrogation transcripts. Also used are intelligence reports regarding US prisoners repatriated from North Korea and China by 1953. Finally, Kim cites POW writings and memoirs and the interviews she herself conducted with former interrogators, Korean POWs, and civilians who lived near the camps.

The book’s first part, “The Element of War,” comprises three of its eight chapters; these adopt a long-term perspective on a trans-Pacific history of interrogation rooms, POWs, and interrogators since World War II. Kim begins with a history of Korea from the Japanese colonial period through the US military occupation of the southern part of the peninsula. She defines POWs as a “bureaucratic category of warfare” (95), encompassing Washington policymakers, the largest POW camp in South Korea (Koje Island), and POWs as political subjects within the decolonization process. Finally, she sketches the journey of interrogators—mostly young Japanese Americans—from internment camps in the United States during World War II to postwar Japan and finally to interrogation rooms in Korea.

The second part of the book, “Humanity Interrogated,” concentrates on four Korean interrogation sites, beginning with the Koje-do camp, where communists, anti-communists, and the UNC resorted to violence in their struggles for recognition and ideological control. One chapter describes the role of the paramilitary, anti-communist South Koreans who took part in the harsh interrogation process inside POW camps. Kim then turns to detention sites organized in the no-man’s land on the 38th parallel under the command of neutral Indian forces, where POWs were required to confirm their choice between repatriation or transfer to a neutral country. Kim traces the difficult journey of twenty-six prisoners who chose to go to Brazil, Argentina, and India; she also discusses the meaning and use of the term “neutral” in postcolonial Korea.

Moving above the 38th parallel, the author examines the experience of American POWs in North Korea, and China as regards their repatriation from communist captivity. Kim shows, too, that American POW camps were places where “brainwashing” operations took place and racial and political tensions appeared among American soldiers.

The book concludes with a discussion of the post-Korean War narrative. For Kim, the war was fought to control not a geopolitical frontier, but rather the “psyches, souls and desires” of ordinary people (358).

Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War uses archival records to clarify the violent post-1945 period in Korea and its physical and cultural consequences. Well and good. But Kim does not contextualize the Korean War within the history of war captivity. Five years before the Korean conflict, US military authorities were already experimenting with psychological and political warfare in their interrogations of German POWs as part of their denazification program. Did the expertise thus acquired provide lessons for dealing with communism in Korea? Some of the phenomena Kim links with a “new warfare,” such as the ideological and racial strife among captives and detaining authorities (217), were not indigenous to Korea, but had precedents in World War I on the Eastern Front and World War II in the United States.

The book has shortcomings. It suffers from repetitiveness, tortuous sentence structure, prolixity, and structural problems. For instance, Kim first mentions POWs only on page 70 and interro-

gation rooms not till page 107. The heart of her analysis begins in chap. 5. The last chapter, on American POWs' experience raises questions. Though the comparison of US and Korean POWs is interesting and illuminates the interrogation process in the context of psychological warfare, it is left to the end and should have included other UN POWs in communist hands (e.g., Commonwealth prisoners).³ The book is, granted, meant for academics and graduate students rather than the general public. But it reads like a PhD thesis. The following passage is typical:

Paying attention to this kind of political history [liberation and decolonization] is critical in order to challenge the current paradigmatic form of warfare that is shaping global politics in the second millennium. If US empire [*sic*] fashions itself as the end telos, the US imperial warfare renders its forms of violence inevitable. The narrative of unending war, constant threat and pervasive suspicion pushes the war of intervention forward as the only possible logical act. (359)

Despite these infelicities, Monica Kim's adoption of a brilliantly innovative approach to her subject will, one hopes, provide a conceptual basis for further research in the field. No small accomplishment.

3. See S.P. MacKenzie, *British Prisoners of the Korean War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2012).