
Reviewed by William Stueck, University of Georgia

This book is not for readers intolerant of wordy, repetitive, and sometimes obscure prose or occasional minor factual errors. Yet those able to forgive such shortcomings will learn much from the original research and analysis provided by a promising young scholar.

Author Monica Kim takes the Korean War off the battlefields of military conflict and into the interrogation rooms in which prisoners-of-war (POWs) were grilled by their captors about their individual histories and beliefs. Making extensive use of post-colonial theory, Kim traces Korea’s painful journey from independence, to a colony of Japan, to liberation from Japan under conditions that left the country divided and still imposed on from outside, to a brutal war that resolved little, and, finally, to the post-armistice dispensation of POWs. She devotes major attention to how the United States attempted to construct a liberal world order after World War II and how that attempt influenced the U.S. occupation of Korea, the creation (through the United Nations [UN]) of an independent South Korea, and eventually the policy of “voluntary repatriation” during the armistice talks in the Korean War.

Most importantly, Kim describes and analyzes how Korean POWs sought to maintain their lives and their individual identities under extremely difficult circumstances. She also includes a rich final chapter on the journey of American POWs through camps in North Korea and back to the United States, where they faced interrogations by their own government at least as rigorous as those executed by their former captors. *The Interrogation Rooms* and David Cheng Chang’s *The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019) represent major contributions to the scholarship on the Korean War, especially in moving the ever-broadening fields of diplomatic and military history beyond their traditional concentration on high-level politics and battlefield tactics and strategies to integrate and contextualize the personal stories of soldiers who were captured.

Kim argues that the POW issue in the Korean War is best seen as part of “the changing script of warfare in the mid-twentieth century,” a process in which “the interior worlds of individuals” became at least as important as “a traditional sense of sovereignty in the state-territorial sense” (p. 5). This is so because Korea and the other “hot” wars of the Cold War occurred in the context of decolonization in which societies were often deeply divided internally, in part due to outside influences. In South
Korea the predominant external influence was the United States, for which “the interrogation room was a compressed site for the configuring and inventing of the labor, infrastructure, and policy required for [its] . . . new liberal empire” (p. 15). The United States created “a stark binary between voluntary and forced repatriation at the negotiating tables” and, in doing so, made “the stunning assertion . . . that the most opaque and coercive space of warfare . . . could be transformed . . . into a liberal, bureaucratic space” (p. 8). This assertion was nonsense, a point other historians have made, albeit with a less theoretical perspective.

The most original part of the book, other than Kim’s sometimes labored theoretical constructs, develops the stories of individual POWs and their interrogators. Kim’s writing is far more accessible here, and her research in U.S. archives—including the recently declassified records of the U.S. Counterintelligence Corps, Korean-language materials, UN and International Red Cross documents, obscure memoirs, and oral histories, over half of which she conducted herself—is truly impressive. Unlike David Cheng Chang, whose research on Chinese POWs is equally impressive, Kim devotes most of her attention to Korean prisoners in UN camps in South Korea and their interrogators and to U.S. prisoners in North Korea and their Chinese and North Korean interrogators. Two of the most fascinating stories are of the 76 Korean POWs who upon release chose to go to a “neutral” country and of Japanese Americans who served as interrogators after having endured concentration camps in the United States during World War II.

Unfortunately, in the second case Kim makes assertions not entirely consistent with the evidence presented. Thus, “the U.S. military assumed that . . . the inclusion of Japanese Americans into the national project of U.S. warfare would [persuade] . . . ‘Oriental’ prisoners of war that they should embrace the benevolence of the United States” (p. 128). Although U.S. soldiers often lumped all East Asians together, they were just as likely to make sharp distinctions between Koreans and Japanese, and they understood that most of the former hated the latter for their depredations on the peninsula earlier in the century. A more persuasive interpretation, for which Kim provides clear evidence, is that the U.S. military believed that Japanese Americans were more likely than Caucasian Americans to be able to communicate with Korean prisoners, who often possessed some understanding of the Japanese language. This is one illustration of a larger problem with Kim’s discussion of American racism, which was undeniably widespread among mid 20th-century white Americans. Nonetheless, her failure to make clear distinctions between race and culture leads to uncertainty as to their weight in specific situations.

Finally, although Kim does delve into U.S. policy deliberations regarding the POW issue, her determination to fit voluntary repatriation into her theoretical framework leads to an exaggeration of the role of the Psychological Strategy Board in the overall process, as well as an underestimation of the degree to which the outcome was influenced by President Harry S. Truman’s sense of moral outrage over Communist behavior. The book justifies the label “international history” for its coverage of the United States, Korea, and even India, which played an important role both during the
last year of the fighting and in the months following the July 1953 armistice. However, the relative inattention to the Communist powers sometimes results in the absence of sufficient context to explain U.S. action fully.

It would be unfair to end on anything other than a positive note. Kim has labored tirelessly in archives on three continents and tracked down a significant number of living POWs for productive interviews. She has written a thoughtful book with broad implications for the course of the Cold War in the postcolonial world and promises to become a major figure among the new generation of Korean War scholars determined to reach well beyond those who have preceded them.


Reviewed by Vojtech Mastny, Independent Scholar

Soviet-Indian relations from the early 1940s through the mid-1960s may seem dated as a topic at a time when the Soviet Union is a distant memory and India’s leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement is no longer relevant. Yet, the intriguing continuities between then and now offer insight into the worldviews and diplomatic practices of both Russia and India today. This 767-page volume by Andreas Hilger, a specialist in German-Russian relations and the deputy director of the German Historical Institute in Moscow, offers readers, including policymakers, much material for reflection.

Hilger’s massive book covers the formative period of what both sides hoped would be a “special relationship” under their visionary leaders, Jawaharlal Nehru and Nikita Khrushchev, a relationship that evolved into a less visionary but still special partnership under their successors, Indira Gandhi and Leonid Brezhnev, and those who came after them—a partnership that remained robust until the end of the Soviet Union. The legacy of that partnership has meant that the disintegration of the USSR is bemoaned in India more than anywhere else outside Russia. The book documents in detail the many-sided interactions between the world’s last imperial power and a major developing country in search of its identity—or, more precisely, between their ruling elites—at a time when the Cold War and decolonization unfolded simultaneously.

Originally written to qualify for a professorship at the German military’s Helmut Schmidt University in Hamburg, Hilger’s book draws on an astounding, though still incomplete, variety of archival sources—Russian, Indian, British, U.S., German, even Dutch. The result is an account so rich in detail that one might expect to be overwhelmed, but this is not the case. For a German academic book, it reads very well, applying an apt touch of sarcasm to the behavior of partners as self-consciously insecure as India, an “ungrateful object of imperial ambitions” (p. 640), and the Soviet Union, a subject attempting in vain to fulfill those ambitions. Hilger’s portrayals of