



The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War: The Untold History

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Monica Kim has written the first major re-interpretation of the Korean War in two generations of scholarship, a rare and considerable historiographical accomplishment, particularly for a first book. Eschewing the multiple military crossings of the 38th parallel as the major interpretative frame for the conflict, Kim argues that the longer-term trajectories and legacies of the Japanese empire and the American government's transpacific imperial goals are the more important frames for understanding the war. She thereby supplants the traditional history of Korea's hot war with a new history of the peninsula's decolonization, a welcome re-assessment of the field. The Korean conflict, Kim argues, began an era of wars of intervention fought over claims for humanity, the start of a period when wars established nation-states. Sovereignty and recognition are two of the major themes of this book, which takes as its main subject the history of prisoners of war (POWs) in camps located below, along, and north of the 38th parallel. Kim is particularly interested in how the history of POWs intersect with, and illuminates, the practices of America's liberal empire, but also how they are tied to other mid-twentieth-century political projects: the right-wing dictatorship of Rhee; the politics of neutralism practiced by India; and North Korea's own

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interrogation regime.

The book's narrative is divided into two sections. "Elements of War" begins with a chapter that surveys Koreans' failed efforts to achieve sovereign recognition in the international system in the first half of the 20th century, followed by the history of American military government in the southern part of the peninsula between 1945 and 1948. Here, Kim interrogates the interrogator, establishing the central role of the US Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) during the occupation, which she describes as an improvised civilizing mission. Elsewhere, I have argued that the US government participated in two occupations of the Korean Peninsula, first from 1945–1948 and then during the Korean War, and this chapter points, in a compatible manner, to one continuous occupation, particularly through the CIC in building an indigenous Korean counterpart that continued the repression of the left and anti-Rhee opposition after the foundation of the Republic in 1948. This "war of espionage" after 1945, which included the establishment of a permanent state of emergency, occurred south of the 38th parallel, and continuously operated "over individual Korean subjects" (p. 72), ultimately facilitating the return of American forces in 1950. This periodization is one way Kim asserts the continuity of the dynamics of Korea's decolonization from 1945 through to 1950 and beyond.

The following chapter on prisoners of war demonstrates how planners re-conceptualized warfare through an emphasis on psychological rollback. In 1951, the newly created US Psychological Strategy Board (PSB) defined America's goal in the armistice negotiations as the liberation of prisoners from having to return to communist China and North Korea, as would have been required under the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which were signed but not ratified by the US government. In this way POWs symbolized and embodied the very structure of sovereignty, and were the focus of conflicts over legitimacy and power in the international system. The prisoners recognized these battles, and the extensive civil violence within the confines of the camps in southern Korea was central to the war for recognition, representing the ongoing decolonization on the Korean Peninsula.

A key to understanding the motivations of US officials is America's

liberal empire, and situating American liberalism in competition with other ideological currents of the 20th century. Within the Cold War, policymakers sought means to displace other ideological frames from the minds of those who embraced them. As Kim points out, the Cold War thus moves, not only into the so-called “hearts and minds,” but also beyond that context, into a realm that the PSB argued were psychological “counter-offensive actions directed toward the satisfaction of fundamental urges, requirements, and desires of individuals, groups, and even entire societies” (p. 100). In this sense, the demands for sovereignty and recognition applied also to the CIC and to the American occupation in general, despite the contingent character of the roots of the occupation itself. And a central goal of the liberal empire is the design of its own recognition.

In making her arguments about sovereignty, Kim cites controversial German legal scholar and former Nazi, Carl Schmitt, whose writings encompassed Germany’s Weimar, Nazi, and Federal Republican eras. Kim ignores Schmitt’s early-twentieth-century publications, focusing instead on his post-Second World War work, especially *Nomos of the Earth* (1950). In that book he lamented the decline of Europe’s *nomos*, described as a West European-based juridical and political system that governed international relations until the late 19th century, a system tied to relations of “order and orientation” and intimately linked to the history of land appropriation. Indeed, this *nomos* had arisen out of the global colonization project from the late 15th century, and led to the creation of European public law that restricted the scale of European warfare by viewing foes as *justis hostes* (just enemies). An adversary’s legitimacy, Schmitt argued, stemmed from the sovereign character of the state for which they fought. In Schmitt’s perspective, this laudable juridical context for prosecuting warfare in Europe was increasingly undermined by Anglo-American dominance in the international system and by the universal moralism tied to their imperial projects. This argument serves as Kim’s entry point for understanding American involvement in Korea: Schmitt had postulated that, from the late 19th century, and especially as a result of the World War I, enemies were not only no longer viewed as “just,” but as the antithesis of humanity. Schmitt’s

views on the subject of sovereignty, however, raise other problems insofar as they uphold and celebrate *nomos*, a worldview that implicitly legitimized violence and formal colonialism in non-European worlds.

The last chapter in the section explores the history of the interrogator, embodied partly through the incredible life of Sam Miyamoto, an American of Japanese ethnicity whose agency was negated by what Kim describes as America's transpacific empire: internment after Pearl Harbor, displacement to Japan in a wartime swap of prisoners, return to the United States, conscription into the US army, and language training to interrogate Korean prisoners during the Korean conflict. Here was the state acting across contradictory scales, operating on a different but related kind of intervention in the lives of its citizens. Kim points out that the art of persuasion was central to the object of the interrogator, equivalent to a conversion through a procedure of disciplining the subjectivity of the POW. The book highlights the moments of resistance to the disciplining interrogation, and especially the conflicts and violence that permeated the immense camp on Koje (Geoje) Island. As Kim shows, both the Japanese American interpreters and the POWs themselves were subjects of multiple empires.

Section two, "Humanity Interrogated," analyzes four POW camps across the Korean Peninsula. On Koje Island, Kim centers the narrative on the prisoners' capture of commander Francis Dodd. The POWs treated Dodd well, at one point even bathing him and asking a North Korean prisoner-physician to confirm his health. The object of the kidnapping was not to hurt the senior officer but to negotiate with him and to convey a critique of the violence against the communist prisoners while sending an appeal to US authorities and the International Committee of the Red Cross for the United States government to adhere to the humanitarian requirements of the 1949 Geneva Conventions. The prisoners endeavored to get the commander to confer legitimacy on themselves as a representative body. In the process, they transformed a room used to teach POWs democracy and English into a forum for their own goals. While meeting in that space, Dodd signed a statement recognizing the Korean and Chinese POW Representatives' Association, effectively an extension of the

Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the People's Republic of China. North Korean POWs therefore achieved, in an indirect way, what formal American diplomacy aimed to deny: recognition of the soldiers of the communist armies as legitimate representatives of their countries. After his release, Dodd was demoted for his actions.

Chapter 5 starts and ends with the covert release of tens of thousands of Korean POWs in June 1953, coordinated by anti-communist Korean youth groups in the camps and South Korean government authorities, including guards supplied by the South Korean army. The chapter highlights the political violence of Korean anti-communist youths amongst the POWs. Kim points out, however, that their agency lay in rejecting American-style democracy, despite their extensive ties with the American Counter-Intelligence Corps. Under the racialized South Korean rightist ideology, genuine Korean democracy could only be realized, the youths believed, through the assertion of Korean cultural and political unity. In the Cold War, Kim shows, Korean nationalist ideology clashed with America's liberal imperial goals on the peninsula. Ultimately, these tensions and others led to the Eisenhower administration's decision to supplant Syngman Rhee as president in 1960.

The POW Ju Yeong Bok was born in Manchuria, served as a translator for the Soviet army during its occupation of northern Korea, and entered POW camp life as a major in the North Korean army. He is a prominent character in chapter 6, which explores the history of POWs through the frame of neutralism. In particular, we learn of the diplomacy of Indian soldiers in deciding the future of the remaining non-repatriate POWs on both sides of the parallel: to live in the country associated with their military service and be repatriated; to reject that option and live in the Korea not tied to their military service; or to go to a neutral country. In most cases, POWs in South Korea already knew their intentions, and, in any case, many who had been in southern camps would have been labeled as suspect by ROK authorities for being from the north and for not escaping their camp in June 1953. Ju was exactly in that position, having decided not to flee imprisonment in order to choose to live in a neutral country. He was one of

the 76 Korean and 12 Chinese POWs who chose a “neutral” country after the end of fighting. These prisoners waited in India for two years before the completion of negotiations, and Ju went to Brazil, eventually writing an autobiography about his experiences. Summarizing his history, Kim observes that “Ju’s life, his own archive, and the 38th parallel all acutely demonstrated the unending nature of the Korean War” (p. 302).

In the penultimate chapter, Kim re-engages the book’s themes of race and the meaning of modern warfare for the citizen-subject, and examines how American POWs lived captivity in North Korean camps, including the ways in which they monitored each other and established organizations—even reconstituting Ku Klux Klan (KKK) organs—to survey other prisoners. Several African-American POWs were targeted as “progressives” and threatened with murder. In communist camps they lived in fear for their lives, not from the North Korean authorities, but from their fellow soldiers. In short, POW camps on both sides of the 38th parallel aggravated fault lines within the societies from which the soldiers originated: ideological conflicts amongst Chinese and Koreans, and racism amongst Americans. Unlike UN/US camps, communist interrogators engaged POWs without interpreters, and their familiarity with American cultural norms, either through their educational experiences in the United States or through Western missionaries, was unnerving to the prisoners. The operations of groups like the KKK inside the camps were part of a broad series of formal and informal American surveillance networks that interrogated and observed the POWs, even after their captivity: CIC and FBI investigators continued to investigate and follow POWs after their release. In this context, Kim highlights the significance of the 1955 US soldier code of conduct for molding future citizen-soldiers, and especially citizen-prisoners.

In theme and argument this book contains outstanding analysis, combined with excellent research into newly released documents from the US National Archives as well as materials available at the archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva.

Kim’s arguments are absorbing and impressive. References to Korea’s decolonization are significant and open more possibilities for understanding

post World War II Korea in comparative perspective. They invite comparisons, for example, with Vietnam, as another partitioned state, one that also experienced civil war. The same document that ordered Japanese soldiers to surrender to US forces south of the 38th parallel in Korea in 1945 and to the Soviet army north of the parallel—General Order No. 1, issued by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers on September 2, 1945—also ordered Japanese forces to surrender to the British-led Southeast Asian Command south of the 16th parallel in Vietnam and to Chinese soldiers north of that same line of latitude. Unlike Korea, Vietnam's division was ultimately a function of the return of the old colonial power—France—after 1945. But, like Korea, the United States intervened in the country's decolonization, both during French rule and with significant military force by the mid-1960s. Monica Kim's focus, however, is not with other big powers, or even with comparative decolonization, but with intellectual history, one combined with intelligence studies, a unique combination for analyses of the Korean War, and an important aspect of her work from which flows the originality of her writing.

The book's arguments about the meaning of the 38th parallel are a significant re-positioning of the Korean War, in favor of an interpretation of the struggle over what Kim refers to as "human interiority." The CIC played a significant role in training South Koreans in this battle, but, as indicated by Kim, Koreans, especially anti-communist youth, also asserted agency. Their violence often transgressed the formal parameters of US policy, but American soldiers on the ground accepted it as consistent with the Korean civil war that US policies helped to sustain. The CIC itself operated within frameworks not only given, but also established by other agencies and individuals, including the Psychological Strategy Board and President Truman. The book thus confronts us with the question of power, the role of a bureaucracy that knew little about Korea or its history, as well as a history that was not and can only be imagined. Furthermore, this perspective does not mean that the 38th parallel was unimportant. Indeed, the division of the peninsula was a major turning point for the violence in Korea after 1945, and the South Korean anti-communist youth groups that operated in POW

camps south of the dividing line were themselves part of a militia force created to unify the peninsula under South Korean authority. They were the group that Syngman Rhee wanted armed, with US weapons, from at least 1949, in order to lead the conquest of North Korea, and it is likely some of them participated in the brief but brutal occupation of North Korea in late 1950.

Kim's work brings new frontiers to our understanding of the Korean War. The full history of the decolonization of the Korean Peninsula, which would presumably lead to a reunification of the two Koreas on terms acceptable to both sides, has yet to be written. The process is unlikely to be realized soon, despite promising diplomatic initiatives engaging both sides in recent years. Since 1953, the central contradiction on the Korean Peninsula is a military system, designed piecemeal, by both sides, to threaten and deter conflict. Until that contradiction is resolved peacefully, decolonization will remain but a paper dream. Until then, and as part of a strategy leading to decolonization, the best mediator of conflict will be increasing interaction between the two Koreas, leading to mutual recognition of each other's sovereignty, something still not achieved almost seventy years after the armistice. As Kim's book suggests, we can only move away from war after that sovereignty has been recognized by all sides. An important part of that process is normal diplomatic relations between the two Koreas, including Korean ambassadors in Seoul and Pyongyang, the most basic step of diplomacy.