

The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War: The Untold History

Monica Kim (Princeton University Press, 2019), 435 pages, illustrations, map.

Reviewed by Yong Suk Lee

The Korean War (1950–53) is often referred to as the Forgotten War. For those who remember it and the estimated 2.5 million killed, it was the first hot war of the Cold War, when the United States and its United Nations allies stepped in to defend South Korea after a surprise North Korean attack in June 1950. The war would rage up and down the peninsula before stalemating where it began at the 38th Parallel. Fewer Americans know how negotiations over prisoner-of-war (POW) exchanges extended the war or the role intelligence officers played in determining POWs' fates.

The status of POWs was one of the most difficult issues to resolve during the peace negotiations that began in July 1951 and would drag on for two years. As the United States, China, South Korea, and North Korea searched for a path to end the conflict, discussions regarding an exchange of prisoners took an untraditional turn. In the history of warfare, POW swaps were typically a straightforward “all-for-all” proposition, and mandatory repatriation was enshrined in the Geneva Conventions of 1949. As historian Monica Kim's *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War* reveals, Korea would not be so simple.

In the United States, evidence of atrocities against UN prisoners, thousands of missing in action, and fears about communist brainwashing (a term that entered the lexicon after some US POWs seemed to have switched sides) alarmed US military leaders and stoked anti-communist attitudes.^a South Korean leaders were worried about the fate of thousands of South Koreans impressed into the North Korean army and now trapped in the North. Beijing objected to anything but an all-for-all exchange. In January 1952, President Truman declared that the United States would not repatriate any prisoners against their will because forcing them to return to communism was

inhumane. Armistice talks broke down repeatedly over the issue of “voluntary repatriation.” Determining the fate of Chinese and Korean POWs would pose a monumental operational challenge for the UN Command.

Interrogation Rooms paints a vivid human story playing out as US intelligence agencies—the Army Criminal Investigation Division (CID), Military Intelligence (MI), and a new Central Intelligence Agency—sought to determine each POW's fate, with neutral observers from Sweden and India as the final arbiters. Kim, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, weaves the narratives of US, North Korean, and South Korean POWs together with those of their US interrogators, many of whom were Japanese-Americans who had been interned in camps established by the Roosevelt administration after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The US reliance on a segment of the population it had once imprisoned based on race to test the allegiances of others was a cruel irony.^b

Issues of race reverberate through Kim's book. Racial bias shaped US relations with Korea before, during, and after the war and for many veterans helped define their wartime experiences. Kim recounts the experience of Sam Miyamoto, a second-generation Japanese-American whose family was rounded up, sent to a camp in the Arizona desert, and then shipped to Japan as part of the Gripsholm Exchange (named for the Swedish ocean liner used for civilian prisoner swaps with the Axis powers).

Miyamoto returned to the United States after the war, was drafted, and by November 1950 was in Korea. When asked by a North Korean POW why he would fight for a government who saw him and his family as an enemy, Miyamoto recounted he was honest with his prisoner. “I'm here because I was ordered to come here. I didn't

a. See Elizabeth Lutes Hillman, “Disloyalty Among Men in Arms: Korean War POWs at Court-Martial,” *North Carolina Law Review* 1629 (2004). Available at: https://repository.uchastings.edu/faculty_scholarship/260.

b. The recruitment and deployment of Japanese-Americans as linguists in the Pacific Theater is the subject of military historian James C. McNaughton's book *Nisei Linguists: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service during World War II*, reviewed by Stephen C. Mercado in *Studies in Intelligence* 52, no. 4 (December 2008).

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

come here by choice. I was ordered to join the army and I was ordered to study the Korean language, and I was ordered to come here and talk to you about this.” (123)

As Kim reminds us, Miyamoto’s experience is a lesser known subplot of the war: the US Army funneled Japanese-American soldiers to Korean language school and then to Korea, assessing that it would be easier for them to communicate with Koreans (Korea was a Japanese colony from 1910 to the end of World War II). Several thousand Japanese Americans—the precise number is unclear—served in the Korean War. For North Korean POWs, Japanese-American GIs merely affirmed the Korean Workers’ Party line that the United States was no different than Imperial Japan and US troops were on the Peninsula to enslave the Korean people.

It was Korea’s status as a Japanese colony that brought the US military to the Peninsula in the first place. The US military arrived in Korea, south of the 38th Parallel, one month after Japan surrendered to the Allies in August 1945; the Soviet Union occupied the northern half. Lieutenant General John R. Hodge had the unenviable task of overseeing the US occupation of South Korea from 1945 to 1948. After the initial euphoria following the end of decades of Japanese rule, public attitude toward the Americans quickly soured. Many saw the United States as new occupiers, especially when Washington floated the idea of a multi-year conservatorship before Koreans would be civilized enough to take care of their own affairs. Amity turned into enmity and students and labor groups took to the streets.

The chaotic politics of the post-colonial era in Korea added fuel to the fire. Leaders of the Korean independence movement descended on Seoul, staked their own claim to rule, and resisted the US military decision to keep in place Korean bureaucrats, including the police, who had worked for the Japanese. Within this volatile mix of nationalist fervor, occupation, resentment, activism, and North Korean agitation, US military and civilian leaders came to rely on military police and intelligence to identify troublemakers and quell civil unrest. Nation-building is messy, and South Korea would be no exception.

The intelligence history of the United States and Korea is cautionary. North Korean agents indeed tried to organize and agitate South Koreans to revolt, but US intelligence personnel far too often were tasked with determining the ideological leanings of civilians whom the South Korean military or the police brought to them with little context, facing life-threatening consequences if judged a leftist. Many were people from all walks of life who joined a protest or a political movement because they were fed up with a corrupt, brutal authoritarian government that labeled anyone who opposed its rule as communist. US intelligence officers were left basing their judgments on nothing more than a gut feeling and frequently being misled by South Korean interlocutors with a political agenda or old scores to settle.

The most exhaustive account of US involvement in Korea before the war remains Bruce Cumming’s *Origins of the Korean War*, but Kim’s book is more approachable for the general reader. She weaves an engaging and informative narrative from the years before the war to the armistice. *Interrogation Rooms* is not a typical military history, and it is an intelligence history by coincidence and not design. The author sets out to tell a moral tale about how the contest of wills between superpowers victimizes individuals, and she looks at US actions through a lens focused on race and violations of personhood. In the process of telling this story, Kim helps readers better understand the history of US intelligence in the early days of South Korean nationhood.

Kim’s historical lens is informative but restrictive, however. She is dismissive of the international context of the conflict and is editorializing with her selective use of quotation marks, such as when she uses “war,” as though World War II and the Korean War were superpower-manufactured constructs. That said, Kim’s first book is well-researched and exhaustive in detail. Although readers and students of intelligence history and the Korean War may disagree with some of her argument and analysis, it is hard to dispute that Kim has given a voice to the voiceless and shed light on parts of the war and the role of intelligence that were previously little known. For this, if for nothing else, *Interrogation Rooms* deserves a wide audience and is a welcome addition to the historiography.



The reviewer: Yong Suk Lee is a former deputy associate director of the CIA and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.