H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Melinda L. Pash. *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation: The Americans Who Fought the Korean War.* New York: New York University Press, 2012. 349 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-6769-6.

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Published on H-War (April, 2013)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Past Due Recognition for Forgotten Warriors

In 1953, MGM studios rushed to complete the production of *Prisoner of War*, a motion picture that the studio promised, in its poster tagline, would tell "the naked truth" about the mistreatment of American prisoners in Korea. Starring Ronald Reagan, playing a US Army officer who infiltrates a North Korean prisoner-of-war (POW) camp to learn the truth about its conditions, *Prisoner of War* was shot in just twenty-eight days. The film was replete with vivid scenes (for the 1950s) of torture and brainwashing with communist propaganda. Andrew Marton, MGM's director for the project, drew on interviews with former prisoners to attain some accurate details of camp conditions. He also hurried the project to completion because he feared that the peace talks at Panmunjom would soon be completed and thus diminish the potential audience when the movie opened. Which is exactly what happened; the armistice came in July 1953, the film received lackluster notices from critics, and the box office receipts were disappointing. The movie was soon all but forgotten. Sadly, so too were many of the men who fought in Korea.

Historians have written many fine books that examine the experiences of American troops who fought in most of the nation's wars (among the finest, see James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* [1998]; John Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I* [1989]; Gerald F. Linderman, *The World within War: America's Combat Experience in World War II* [1999]; and Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* [1993]). But until Melinda L. Pash's *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, a volume on those who served in Korea has been conspicuously absent. This is no doubt partly because, as Pash notes, Korean combatants fought in the shadow of those slightly older men who had carried the nation to great triumph in the Second World War. Korea by contrast ended in an unsavory draw.

Indeed the conflict was a rather humiliating experience for the United States from beginning to end. The war opened poorly in 1950, when North Korean troops launched an unexpected attack on South Korea. Caught by surprise and poor intelligence gathering, American officers in the Japanese occupation forces hastily organized the first American troops, mostly draftees in Japan, and rushed them to Korea. Poorly equipped with often faulty surplus weapons from 1945 stocks, and improperly trained and with no real idea of why they were there (an indictment against the officers who served in General Douglas MacArthur's occupation forces), the green soldiers were soundly beaten in early engagements. Many who surrendered were executed summarily by North Korean officers. Other prisoners were subsequently mistreated; Pash uses interviews to provide graphic descriptions of "death march" atrocities, starvation of POWs, and other similar atrocities for which the North Koreans have never been called to account.

The American survivors of the first battles retreated southward and barely hung on until new draft levies and reinforcements from National Guard units arrived to reverse the tide, only to face masses of Chinese "volunteers" entering the contest in late 1950. Pash uses veterans' interview material to expand on what has already been published about the Chosin Reservoir campaign, adding valuable details on lesser-known parts of the harsh winter fighting in 1950-51. After staving off the Chinese offensive, American forces stabilized a front that protected the South Korean capital of Seoul, then fought a stalemated conflict for two more years. All of this is well related by Pash, who uses federal records and further interviews with Korean veterans, allowing them to relate most of the story in their own words. The interview material in particular illustrates just how ambivalent many of these men came to be about their "mission" in Korea. Men seldom knew "the reason behind what we

were doing, what the objective was, or what was coming next," one veteran complained (p. 108). Worse, unlike soldiers in either of the world wars, these men almost never felt that they were appreciated "as liberators" by the Korean people. Nor could they comprehend how this war was protecting the United States. Pash found that many veterans she spoke to still remain uncertain about the meaning of their service. This was particularly true for African American veterans who almost invariably commented that, despite the new army policy for integration, they were still discriminated against, especially by officers raised in the South; still given unwanted tasks more frequently than white soldiers; and rarely promoted.

Such views and the subsequent lack of a clear victory naturally invite comparisons to Vietnam. Some parallels to the Vietnam experience, in terms of alienation and post-combat stress are quite valid, as Pash discusses in detail. But Pash offers a surprise in the matter of post-military economics of Korean vets, noting data that shows most Korean veterans "made up" for lost time in the American economy faster than veterans of later conflicts, a result of the booming 1950s growth. But she pointedly states that African Americans, still segregated, were often not part of this bonus. She maintains as well that Korean veterans generally have retained bitter memories of how little attention Americans "back home" gave to the Korean conflict, and how rarely they appreciated those who had fought in it (pp. 108-109). Pash's work should stimulate further research in comparing the Korean vets' experiences to those of Vietnam vets and those who have since served in the Middle East.

Pash's book will not alter the current interpretations of the Korean conflict. But in this well-written and comprehensive study, she presents a much greater sense than has been heretofore available of what the soldiers who fought this conflict experienced. Pash has filled a major gap in American military history, and performed a singular service concerning the lot of the Korean veteran, who today is passing from the American scene almost as quickly as the "greatest generation" veterans. Inasmuch as their experiences mark the transition from the 1940s war against fascism, when Americans hoped yet again to create a peaceful world, to the long Cold War, the men and women who served in Korea deserve to be remembered. The book is recommended to anyone who seeks further information on Korea and the lot of the American soldier. Thanks to Pash, Korean War veterans have finally been given a long-delayed acknowledgement for their sacrifices.

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Citation: Terry Shoptaugh. Review of Pash, Melinda L., *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation: The Americans Who Fought the Korean War.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37743

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