

S. P. MacKenzie. *British Prisoners of the Korean War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 165 pp. \$110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-965602-8.

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Escape narratives, tales of strength in the face of brutality, and reports of staunch resistance against Communist indoctrination dominated British government and popular accounts of the approximately one thousand British servicemen and civilians held captive during the Korean War by Communist China and North Korea from 1950 to 1953. Approximately sixty-three thousand members of the British military served during the Korean War. The earliest work on the relatively small number of British prisoners of war (POWs) focused on their resistance to indoctrination, as well as their mistreatment in POW camps. While this is an accurate image of some prisoners, S. P. MacKenzie argues that their treatment directly depended on how they were perceived by their captors, which resulted in a myriad of individual experiences. This contrasts the nationally promoted idea of British Korean War POWs as united and resistant to indoctrination. MacKenzie identifies a need for, and subsequently provides, a comprehensive and nuanced account of the treatment of captured British soldiers and civilians.

MacKenzie is the Caroline McKissick Dial Professor of History at the University of South Carolina, and his work is preceded only by government and popular accounts. He clearly outlines the trajectory of British work on POWs in his introduction. The British Ministry of Defence's *Treatment*

of British Prisoners of War in Korea marked the earliest comprehensive work in 1955, followed by Cyril Cunningham's *No Mercy, No Leniency: Communist Mistreatment of British Prisoners of War in Korea* in 2000. Furthermore, the official account of the British part in the Korean War was written by a former POW. MacKenzie identifies a need for an updated history of the British POW experience, based on an increase in the number of memoirs, newly available interviews, and access to British and American POW debrief interviews. Government publications downplayed the effectiveness of Communist indoctrination and focused on harsh treatment, while popular accounts favored escape narratives and highlighted British strength over adversity. MacKenzie explains that the experiences of British POWs do not easily fit into either generalization.

MacKenzie asserts that the first British POWs included civilians taken during the capture of Seoul, followed by prisoners taken from the Royal Marines. The last wave of POWs included the officially and popularly studied one thousand members of the British army. Neither the civilians nor the military members were trained for capture. After 1951, the Chinese government took control of POW camps in North Korea and replaced hard labor with "the chance of communist re-education" for most United Nations (UN) captives (p. 5).

The reeducation camps focused on Communist indoctrination, but the three groups of British POWs responded differently to attempts to win their hearts and minds.

The North Koreans captured approximately fifty civilians in Seoul in July 1950. While the civilians faced serious hardship in captivity, they were not treated with the same animosity as American soldiers. Many British civilian POWs did not recognize the divergence in treatment when they relayed stories of American captives upon their return. George Blake, a British civilian who served as a double agent for the Soviet government after his release from captivity, described American soldiers as “pampered” because they were used to “hygienically prepared food in the army canteens, to their doughnuts and Coca-Cola” (p. 16). In Blake’s opinion, the Americans appeared to succumb more easily to disease. Captured British military members echoed Blake’s description, but these accounts failed to describe the drastic difference in treatment between the British and American POWs.

British military members were taken captive after the Chinese took control of North Korean POW camps and were treated as pupils. The Chinese solicited personal information from the captives to determine who might be predisposed to accepting and promoting Communist ideas. The prisoners fell into one of two categories: reactionary or progressive. Reactionaries received the worst treatment because they resisted indoctrination and protested imprisonment. Progressives collaborated with the Chinese and in some cases acted as double agents when they returned home. The British and other UN prisoners were considered “merely tools of imperialism” (p. 24). They received better overall treatment than American prisoners, who appeared disheveled and lazy from enduring greater hardships.

One of the most intriguing aspects of MacKenzie’s analysis is his description of the animosity between British and American POWs and how

British perceptions fueled “a good deal of perhaps quite needless soul-searching in the United States afterward” (p. 15). Melinda Pash’s recent comprehensive account of American Korean War veterans, *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation: Those Who Fought the Korean War* (2012), explains the dissonance between the reception that veterans expected when they returned home and the reality of an indifferent public. Pash asserts that Korean War POWs faced the harshest reality, because they were regarded as weaker than American POWs of prior wars and brainwashed into collaborating with their captors. The intersection of British observations of American POWs, American perceptions of POWs, and the American public’s nonchalance about the Korean War most likely combined to prompt the “soul-searching.” There is interesting work to be done on the international perception of Korean War veterans.

At 160 pages, this volume’s brevity does not hinder MacKenzie’s ability to convey the complexities of the British POW experience. He weaves basic information about the timeline of the war into his analysis, which makes the work accessible to those with both great and little knowledge of the Korean War. MacKenzie accomplishes his stated goals and sparks questions about the British national image of Korean War POWs and how Korean War veterans are perceived in their respective countries. Who are these soldiers and what happens when they do not match the image constructed and absorbed into national imaginations? How does the nationally promoted idea of British POWs as mentally and physically stronger, as well as more united, than their American counterparts affect the personal and national identities of Americans taken prisoner during the Korean War? Overall, MacKenzie’s work is a significant addition to an underdeveloped historiography and marks the importance of examining how soldier experiences during the Korean War shaped a global generation.

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