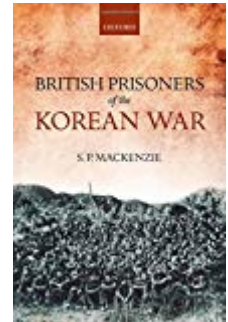


S. P. MacKenzie. *British Prisoners of the Korean War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 165 pp. \$110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-965602-8.



Reviewed by Paul Springer

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

S. P. MacKenzie, the Caroline McKissick Dial Professor of History at the University of South Carolina, possesses a well-deserved reputation for excellent scholarship. His previous work has examined many aspects of British military service, in particular, the history of British troops taken captive by the enemy. In his latest study, MacKenzie examines the experiences of British prisoners taken during the Korean War, and he argues that these prisoners had a lower mortality rate than their American allies due to a greater emphasis on hygiene, a tighter group cohesion, and the ability of the British commanding officers to keep morale high within the compounds.

This subject presents an interesting counterpoint to the common narrative of prisoners of war (POWs) held by the North Koreans and Chinese during the war. The story of the POW camps in North Korea tends to be dominated by the American captivity experience, with its lurid tales of brainwashing and mistreatment by cruel captors determined to break the enemies they controlled. MacKenzie reminds the reader that while

the American captivity story is an important aspect of the war, it is not the only such experience that is worthy of examination. He breathes life into the subjects of his study, and in particular, the individual stories of courage, especially of British leaders determined to resist the enemy to their last breath, are inspiring. The author uses a wide variety of largely overlooked sources, including a host of interviews with prisoners who survived their experience. He breaks down the various groups held by the enemy and essentially treats each as a separate wartime experience. These groups include specific military units, such as the Glosters, the Ulsters, and the Royal Marines; civilians captured by the enemy; and a small subgroup of particularly troublesome prisoners labeled as “reactionaries” by the Chinese and North Koreans. These divisions are both a strength and a weakness of the work, as they allow the narrative to be transmitted in a series of smaller, more digestible chunks, but they also work to undercut any general conclusions that

might be drawn about the experiences of these unfortunate men.

While the work as a whole is a very solid effort, the first chapter, where MacKenzie does a cursory literature review and contextual overview, has a series of errors that should have been caught before the work was put into print. The most glaring is his announcement that the war began in 1951—there is really no excuse for missing the start date of a war by a full year (p. 4). The central chapters of the work are each quite strong and capable of standing alone as a small-unit examination of the POW experience, but the whole does not come to a satisfying conclusion, in part because of the divisions created within the text. The author relies heavily on British sources, which makes sense for a work of this type, but at times, the assertions of his British subjects are taken at face value, rather than compared with the experiences of other nationalities held captive under the same conditions. The bibliography is unsatisfying, to say the least, as it is missing a large number of the sources contained within individual citations.

However, the chief complaint that I have with the book is that it is ludicrously overpriced. Oxford University Press has placed a list price of 110 dollars on the book, making it page-for-page one of the most expensive books released on the academic market. Compounding the problem, the Oxford website (and by extension, Amazon.com) lists the book as containing 224 pages, adding a full 50 percent to the length as if to justify the outrageous asking price. While this work might be a useful supplementary text for an undergraduate military history survey, there is simply no way that a conscientious faculty member could ask students to pay this much for the book. Oxford should be ashamed of this ridiculous cost, as it is completely undercutting the author's ability to contribute to the discussion of POWs in Korea. The work is well written, but even libraries might balk at the cost to acquire such a small work, and individual read-

ers will likely be disappointed if they purchase the work for their own collections.

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