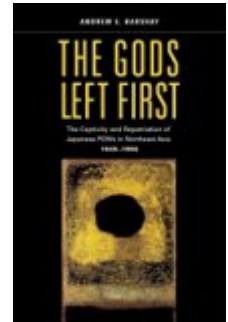


**Andrew E. Barshay.** *The Gods Left First: The Captivity and Repatriation of Japanese POWs in Northeast Asia, 1945-1956.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. xii + 239 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-27615-4.



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In his most recent book, *The Gods Left First*, Andrew E. Barshay examines the lived experience and memory of the “Siberian internment” endured after August 1945 by over six hundred thousand members of the Japanese Kwangtung Army. Although these soldiers were only a fraction of the over six million imperial subjects who were situated in the “outer territories” (in Japanese, *gaichi*) of the dissolved Japanese Empire, Barshay argues that “it was the Siberian internees whose time in limbo and captivity went on the longest, whose process of return was the most ridden with political manipulation and existential uncertainty” (p. 3). Barshay uses these soldiers to illuminate several fields of history: the Siberian internment itself, an event that has largely been overlooked by historians in English, Japanese, and Russian languages; the gulag experience, seeking to push this field of history to incorporate Japan’s lost empire and the post-World War II historiography; and Cold War historiography, demonstrating how returning soldiers were treated among the general population of Japan. Barshay is successful

in his ability to address a heretofore neglected element of the World War II historiography and in his development of a framework that uses the genre of “memoir literature” and visual art as the means to examine both the Siberian internment and the conditions of returnees within Cold War Japanese society.

Barshay supports his work on the gulag experience with three case studies drawn from his self-defined “phases” of the internment, the timing of which were dependent on when the soldier’s “release” came (in Russian, *domoi*). His first case study is Kazuki Yasuo, an artist who managed to keep one of two known written day-to-day records of the internment and for decades after his repatriation worked on the “Siberia Series” of paintings that was likened to Marcel Proust’s exhaustive reexamination of memory in his book, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913). The second case study is Takasugi Ichiro, who participated in the “reeducation” movements of Soviet democracy and whose survival depended on his ability to navigate tense relationships with powerful local party

politicians until his eventual realization that he had become “one of them.” The last case study is Ishihara Yoshio, who was found to be guilty as a war criminal by the Soviets and whose post-repatriation poetry revealed a survivor’s experience that Barshay puts into context with Viktor Frankl’s text, “Experiences in a Concentration Camp.”

In the first section, Barshay intertwines several histories to answer the question, “What was the Siberian internment?” At its most basic, the Siberian internment was the Soviet Union’s planned detainment of over six hundred thousand officers, soldiers, and noncommissioned officers of the Japanese Kwangtung Army in two thousand Siberian labor camps (within the gulag system) from August 1945 until late 1956, though most internees had been returned by 1950. The internment was the direct consequence of the Soviet Union’s declaration of war against Japan on August 9, 1945. Barshay notes that many historians of World War II underestimate the importance of the Soviet Union’s entrance into the Pacific War; although the Japanese emperor’s radio address of surrender on August 15, 1945, cited the power of the American atomic bombs, the actual orders issued to the soldiers and sailors of the imperial Japanese army indicated the Soviet Union as the immediate factor for surrender. While people in mainland Japan awaited the arrival of the American naval fleet to begin the period of Allied occupation, Joseph Stalin’s Red Army continued to wage war with the Kwangtung Army in Manchuria. The Kwangtung Army suffered from both hubris and lack of communication, and within a week the massive force of the Red Army (numbering 1.5 million soldiers, five thousand tanks, and five thousand planes) easily progressed southward to the Korean 38th parallel and engaged in fierce fighting in the Sakhalin and Kuril islands. As late as August 22, 1945, Stalin planned to continue the incursion southward to the Japanese island of Hokkaido, which he planned to occupy, although President Harry S. Truman diplomatically rebuffed this plan and the Soviet Union

settled for the territory its army currently controlled. Accordingly, the Soviet Union was tasked with managing the fate of the Kwangtung Army.

Barshay notes that the battles between the Soviets and Japanese at Nomonhan/Khalkin Gol (starting in 1938) established the precedent between the two states for the exchange of “prisoners of war” as directed by the Geneva Convention (p. 27). However, two separate circumstances prevented the immediate return of the Japanese after August 1945. First, Japanese soldiers, sailors, and pilots had been indoctrinated to avoid “surrender” and becoming a “prisoner” at all costs; this phrasing becomes important later to the captured soldiers’ identity. To ensure the Japanese soldiers laid down their weapons, Emperor Hirohito sent the crown princes to all theaters of war to personally instruct the armies to cease hostilities. After delivering the message, the Japanese elites—from Shinto priests to colonial officials—then fled to mainland Japan to avoid capture by the Red Army. Abandoned by these “gods” of imperial Japanese culture, the ordinary soldiers of the Kwangtung Army were given a turn of phrase to help them psychologically endure their upcoming capture; instead of “prisoners of war,” they would be “internees.” This phrasing worked in tandem with the second circumstance, which was Stalin’s desire for reparations for historical Japanese aggression against his country, which started with the Russo-Japanese War that ended in Japan’s favor in 1905. By 1945, the Soviet Union’s population had been depleted and fatigued by war, and Stalin used the initially healthy Kwangtung Army as forced labor within a branch of the gulag system. Barshay estimates that the soldiers provided over fifty billion man-hours of labor during the internment on projects like constructing the Baikal-Amur railroad, building lodging for Soviet citizens, mining, and logging operations. The irony of this labor system, of course, was that the Japanese soldiers were now the brunt of the same

forced labor that they had coerced from colonial Taiwanese, Koreans, Chinese, and Filipinos.

Because the soldiers of the Kwangtung Army were not technically “prisoners of war,” the Soviet Union was not beholden to treat them according to international agreements, and this led to an uneven lived experience across the system that Barshay successfully describes in his case studies. Despite the variation in living conditions, Barshay indicates that internees almost universally shared two experiences: they moved between labor camps and they were prohibited from writing of any kind. To reconstruct and represent the Siberian internment, Barshay develops his own framework that relies on the extensive “memoir literature” written by returned internees and combines it with the visual and written artworks created by his subjects. Within the memoir literature, Barshay identifies that the timing of internment and subsequent timing of return was crucial to internees’ interpretation of the lived experience. He identifies the first returnees (mid-1947 to mid-1948) as having the hardest experience because the basic necessities to sustain life were scarce or unavailable in the camps. The next group of returnees (late 1948 to 1950) had a more favorable experience once a supply chain of minimal sustenance had been established to the camps. The last group were those considered “war criminals” by the Soviet state, some who returned as late as 1956, and this group faced the toughest readjustment due to the drastic changes within Japanese society.

The second section of this book involves multiple chapters of case studies from actual survivors of the Siberian labor camps. Barshay’s first case study uses Kazuki Yasuo as an example of the first group of returnees. Kazuki was one of two known internees who managed to keep a day-to-day record and successfully smuggle it to mainland Japan. After his return, Kazuki resumed his career in art and devoted his life to creating the “Siberia Series,” which were fifty-seven canvases

portraying his memories of life in the labor camps. One time as Kazuki was being transported between camps by train, he was deeply affected by finding the “red corpse” (p. 51) of a skinned, deceased Japanese soldier laying near the tracks. With the image of the red corpse etched in his mind, Kazuki’s art revisited the labor camps using the trope of stoic, impassive faces. Barshay uses Kazuki’s art and written narrative to examine the “profane” experience of the Siberian internment (p. 43), a time when the Japanese soldiers—a significant minority of whom were students or older men who never participated in combat—had to deal with the geographical dismemberment of their empire, the psychological disintegration of their cultural values, and the physical depreciation of their bodies. Barshay builds off the analysis of Tachibana Takashi, who compared Kazuki’s art to Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* on the grounds that Kazuki could not “move on” from the internment but instead constantly reexamined it from every angle available to his memory. The result was a life’s work that was highly critical of the emperor and war, or as Kazuki asked, “Who will take responsibility for the red corpse? And how?” (p. 71). Kazuki’s accounts reflect the gulags as a place of inhumanity and reflect the excruciating circumstances of the first years of the internment.

The second case study, “Knowledge Painfully Acquired,” focuses on Takasugi Ichiro, who had been an editor at a progressive publishing company in mainland Japan prior to being drafted and sent to the Manchurian front. Takasugi was a studied humanist and devoted Esperantist (readers will encounter a surprising number of Japanese and Soviet Esperantists throughout the book), and Barshay uses Takasugi’s viewpoint “to think through his experience as a Japanese ... a man of words, and a human being who ... takes responsibility for his own role in ... the history of his time” (p. 85). Takasugi’s interpretation of his experience rather than mere reporting led to an epiphany that Barshay calls “knowledge painfully

acquired”; this knowledge was Takasugi’s navigation of the Communist system until he became “one of them” (p. 109). Through Takasugi, Barshay explores the “democratic movement” in Siberia, using one activist’s words to describe the environment as “democracy devoid of the idea of freedom” (p. 91). During this time, life at the labor camps became sustainable thanks to the creation of a food supply and the shifting of daily activities to include “reeducation.” The central goal of this Communist-led democratic movement was the instillation of revolutionary fervor into the internees, and it was done simultaneous to the cleaving of the social hierarchy between Japanese officers and soldiers. Thus, many internees paid lip service to the reeducation movement in the hopes that even feigned enthusiasm for Stalinism would draw them one day closer to return. Yet underneath this fervor ran a process through which the former Japanese military hierarchy unraveled as internees created new frameworks of social hierarchy. Barshay uses Takasugi’s popular 1950 memoir, *In the Shadow of the Northern Lights*, to highlight the subtle manners in which the Communist ideologues pitted the Japanese servicemen against each other. Despite Takasugi’s recognition of the Communist Party’s goals, he wrote in his memoir, “we can’t ignore the fact that in this country, 600,000 Japanese have experienced socialism.... The issue is that without exception, they have experienced socialism, not from a pamphlet, but in their actual lives” (p. 110). The experience of the gulags continued to haunt the returnees not only in their physical suffering but also in their ideological self-worth.

The final case study examines Ishihara Yoshiro, who had been selected for Russian-language training and worked in the intelligence division of the Kwangtung Army; this status made him a “war criminal” for the Soviets and he was sentenced to twenty-five years of service, though he only served eight years. During his internment, Ishihara was sent to a logging camp that was part of the highly lethal Baikal-Amur railroad camp

system. Although Ishihara spent only one of his eight years at the logging camp, it was so excruciating that it scarred him for life and sent him into a prolonged period of being unable to communicate verbally. After Stalin died in 1953, Ishihara was allowed to return home to Japan, a country that was two years removed from Allied occupation. Ishihara went straight to his family’s home and was rebuked by his surviving family members. He then went to Tokyo and drifted without purpose in the new capitalist system, finding solace only in the city’s churches. Without recognition from society, Ishihara turned to writing, where he found his voice—both verbal and prosaic—and was able to communicate the struggles experienced by those “war criminals” who served the longest in the Siberian internment and returned home to a Japan that was almost alien to them. Ishihara wrote of his release, “My best self did not return” (p. 121). Barshay finds this phrase resonant with the writings of Viennese psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl’s essay, “Experiences in a Concentration Camp,” and Barshay finds commonalities between Frankl and Ishihara’s experiences as survivors that culminate in the simple question they faced upon return, “Now what?” Ishihara vaguely admitted that his survival in the labor camp was due to selling someone out, and therefore his future—the time his life had gained at the cost of someone else’s life—required justification, a task that Barshay notes Ishihara was never able to accomplish before his death in 1977. Ishihara’s collected prose and poetry writings were printed in 1967, and the Japanese public was moved by his clear mental stress.

Barshay’s final section contains a brief examination of *The Shooting Stars Are Alive*, an autobiographical fiction novel written by Fujiwara Tei about her life while fleeing the conflict in Manchuria. Published in 1949 to coincide with the first Mother’s Day, Fujiwara’s book examines her family’s situation after the Kwangtung Army surrendered, with Fujiwara most notably having to

abandon her socially structured role of the meek housewife to become a peddler in order to feed her family. Fujiwara and her family were situated in an area that is now North Korea, and Barshay summarizes her experience of fleeing south past the 38th parallel into modern-day South Korea, where she was able to take a crowded ship to Japan. Fujiwara's novel later became a movie and was emblematic of the difficulty encountered by those nonmilitary Japanese who returned home after the war.

In his book, Barshay invites the reader to consider whether the Siberian internees—or any of the over six million Japanese living in the outlying territories of the empire—were really welcomed home. The extensive memoir literature, art, and texts that detail the Siberian internment also speak to the problems encountered by the returnees. In short, the Japan that they returned to was not the Japan that they had left. Furthermore, there was the underlying complication of ethnic Korean, Taiwanese, and Chinese internees who had been part of the Japanese military—were they to be returned to Japan or to their “home” country? What about the ethnic Japanese who had been born in Manchuria and never previously visited mainland Japan? These are questions that Barshay raises and briefly addresses, but are beyond the scope of the book to answer in significant detail.

In summary, Barshay's work illuminates a largely under-examined experience that significantly shaped the post-World War II environment of both Japan and the Soviet Union. Barshay indicates that his research should in no way be considered to speak for the entirety of the Siberian internment, yet nonetheless it should provide a starting point for discussion and a framework to describe phases of the lived experience of the Japanese in the gulags.

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