CONTEXT OF COLLABORATION

William C. Latham Jr.: *Cold Days in Hell: American POWs in Korea*. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012. Pp. xiii, 301.)

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A visitor to Sunchon, North Korea, in spring 1951 would be stunned to find a handful of American GIs wandering freely in the streets. They were prisoners of war whose North Korean guards barely watched them, but neither did they feed them. For six weeks the POWs begged and raided corn fields until a passing Chinese officer ended the arrangement. This is one of the fascinating stories unearthed by William C. Latham, a professor at the Army Logistics University in Virginia. *Cold Days in Hell* is the most systematic exploration in print of the experience of American POWs in the Korean War. It draws on his own oral histories and archival research, along with memoirs and secondary literature. Korea was once the unwritten war, but enough works have accumulated that a POW synthesis was in order. Latham provides a compelling assessment of what is known about captivity in Korea. The title, *Cold Days in Hell*, places it in the tradition concerned chiefly with commemorating veterans, but it treats evidence in a balanced, professional manner.

Korean captivity was distinctive because so many prisoners allegedly collaborated with the enemy. They read communist propaganda over shortwave radio and twenty-one "turncoats" defected to China after the war. Years of hand wringing about the character of the modern male followed. One of Latham's central claims is right on the mark: the manhood of GIs was not what was different about Korea; rather, they were systematically used in enemy propaganda for the first time and then scrutinized at home during the red scare. Comparison to other wars would strengthen the point. Collaboration is always present in prison camps, but captors in Korea demanded a form more visible to the homeland.

The first half of the book details the Korean War as it raged up and down the peninsula. The battle history could have been more economical, as could three pages on the sacking of General MacArthur. But a point well taken is that many GIs were captured by the Chinese because MacArthur split his forces. The narrative proceeds to the deadliest period of captivity, winter 1950–1951, then to the Chinese indoctrination program that turned some prisoners against their leaders. After the war, ex-POWs were greeted with suspicion and recrimination. Latham does link Korean POWs to wider issues, but is more interested in military lessons than political or social.

POWs had a very high death rate in Korea, which has to be integrated with the political collaboration that occurred. Prisoners were required to spend each day listening to and discussing Chinese lectures. Some POWs became advocates of revolutionary politics, others collaborated secretly as informers. *Cold Day in Hell* accepts the perception of many former prisoners that the starvation and abuse in the first year of captivity were designed to break resistance. With 7,000 prisoners suffering a 38 percent death rate, there is evidence for this, but proving that starvation was calculated, not the result of the chaos of war, is tricky. By fall 1951, the dying was over. Latham guesses that nutrition improved because the Chinese belatedly recognized "the propaganda value of keeping UN prisoners alive" (193). However, Chinese supply was so strained that their own troops were sometimes too hungry to operate. A slow but steady increase in food began in early 1951 and prisoner mortality dropped throughout the summer. The simple thawing of ice on the Yalu River allowed barges of vegetables to reach hungry prisoners and the advent of peace talks in July 1951 also reduced logistical urgency. This pattern fits an inadequate logistics system that prioritized Chinese combat troops but gradually improved despite constant air attack. Latham notes that food improved first in Camp 12 where the indoctrination program began (126). The Chinese wanted genuine revolutionary converts and the biggest obstacle was how horribly the prisoners had suffered. Starvation was more burden than tool in reeducation efforts. Atrocities by guards present a similar interpretive problem. Violence occurred primarily during forced marches and temporary camps. Its political use was so selective that POWs found they could backtalk their instructors to the point that mandatory indoctrination ended after one year. The limited political persuasion the Chinese achieved was due more to manipulating group dynamics than atrocity. Refreshingly, Latham rejects the canard that prisoners were brainwashed; methods of coercion were "centuries-old" (13).

Cold Days in Hell judges Chinese indoctrination a failure and dismisses old accounts of wholescale assistance to the enemy. The author attributes the panicked perception largely to the media. Newspapers' "anticommunist fervor" led them to hype incidents that GIs were overeager to tell and to fixate on clumsily handled court martials (4–5). One scandal-chasing journalist that Latham correctly focuses on was Eugene Kinkead, author of *In Every War But One*. Unfortunately Latham did not happen upon the National Security Council documents showing that Kinkead was an Army plant. His work was secretly edited and cleared by security officials in return for classified access. The Army actively promoted the blanket criticism of repatriates and supplied the data that many of the shrillest media stories were based on. This was part of a wider fear that declining manhood was a Cold War security vulnerability. Latham echoes the 1950s masculine panic in saying that a "disturbing number of prisoners … simply lost the will to live" during hungry times (133). This was called "give-up-itis" after the war by physicians who were there. Actually, the depression and inactivity they observed was ancient behavior. The doctors mistook the neurological impact of nutritional diseases like pellagra for a lack of character. Similarly, a "disturbing number" of Air Force flyers "rationalized the signing of a bogus confession" to germ-war atrocities. The thirty-eight pilots capitulated to "fear, fatigue, or physical discomfort," while forty held up (183). This underestimates the power of solitary confinement, which should be considered actual torture. The Chinese were intent on getting germ warfare confessions because of embarrassing reports that communist POWs were defecting en masse to Taiwan. The pressure on flyers was going to continue until there were enough detailed statements for a propaganda offensive, and somebody had to be the first thirty-eight. It would be interesting to know the chronology of germ-war confessions. The Chinese may simply have given up on the forty holdouts once they had sufficient material.

William Latham has done wonderful research that largely breaks free of old misconceptions. The only recompense for being beat to print by him is getting to write the first review.

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