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William Clark Latham Jr., *Cold Days in Hell: American POWs in Korea*. College Station: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. xiii, 301. ISBN 978-1-60344-073-8.

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The “Great Escape” is one of the most memorable stories of the Second World War—an act of defiant resistance by captured airmen enduring life in a German POW camp. Ostensibly powerless prisoners managed to organize and execute a daring escape that was reported in newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts, and an eyewitness account<sup>1</sup> that became the source for a blockbuster Hollywood film.<sup>2</sup> The glory of the exploit remains with us still, even though it ended with fifty of the escapees being rounded up and executed by the SS.

The memory of Korean War POWs usually follows a far different narrative, one not of defiance and resistance but of defeat, surrender, and subversion. The baffling defection of twenty-one American service members to Communist China seemed to confirm the worst suspicions about the pervasive and corrosive influence of communism; the moral panic over “brainwashing,” as featured most clearly in the 1962 film *The Manchurian Candidate*,<sup>3</sup> long shaped popular perceptions of America’s performance in the war and of the men captured during it.

In *Cold Days in Hell*, William Latham (US Army Logistics Univ.) presents the results of a decade of research into American stories of imprisonment, mistreatment, and resistance in North Korean and Chinese custody. Based on interviews with former POWs, archival research, and a thorough review of the literature, the book offers an accessible account of the prisoners’ experiences before, during, and after their captivity. Its title may seem melodramatic, but the numbers speak for themselves—of nearly seven thousand American soldiers captured during the war, almost fifty percent died in enemy custody.

The death rate among captured Americans was higher than that of other Allied prisoners; British prisoners were surprised by (and at times contemptuous of) US soldiers who appeared to lose their will to live while in captivity.<sup>4</sup> Latham quotes Sid Esensten, one of two American doctors who tried, often in vain, to keep Americans alive in the horrific conditions of the camps:

[The prisoner] was not that sick—had dysentery—but I had him in the hospital to protect him from others as he refused to get up to use the latrine. I spent twenty minutes talking to him one day, at first using a sympathetic approach—about the love his parents had for him—ended up scolding. He just looked up at me and said “Doc, you can’t make me live.” I just turned to talk to another patient for two minutes, looked back, and he was dead. (133)

The preparedness and resilience in combat of American soldiers were cast into doubt by their poor health and hygiene and apparent willingness to sign crude propagandistic peace petitions and outlandish confessions of crimes dreamed up by their Chinese minders. And, too, the defections at the end of the war created widespread concern among both civilians and military authorities, especially in light of the Third World War that seemed to loom on the horizon.

Latham follows in the footsteps of Albert Biderman’s seminal study *March to Calumny*,<sup>5</sup> which refuted postwar criticism of the performance of American POWs. Latham argues that their particular experience

1. Paul Brickhill, *The Great Escape* (NY: Norton, 1950).

2. *The Great Escape* (1963), dir. John Sturges.

3. Dir. John Frankenheimer, based on the book by Richard Condon (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1959).

4. See S.P. MacKenzie, *British Prisoners of the Korean War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2012).

5. Subtitle: *The Story of American POW's in the Korean War* (NY: Macmillan, 1963).

was unlike anything in the country's history, owing largely to North Korean and later Chinese planning for and conduct of the war.

The book catalogues actions throughout the war that led to the capture of American and Allied soldiers and civilians, with attention to their subsequent treatment. The first year of the Korean War brought dramatic reversals of fortune that had a material and cumulative impact on those held in captivity.

North Korea's invasion caught the South by surprise, and the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) took many prisoners, civilian and military, for whom it had no organized internment camps or other facilities to care for them. This is no surprise, since neither the NKPA nor their Chinese allies recognized the Geneva conventions; the lack of prisoner infrastructure and endemic carelessness caused many American deaths. Prisoners were housed in makeshift shelters such as bombed-out schoolhouses, brickyards, and caves. In one notable case, thirty-three prisoners sheltering from UN air attacks in a railway tunnel suffocated when the Chinese neglected to shut down a locomotive. Others died from friendly fire when their captors deliberately failed to properly mark columns and facilities containing POWs. Sick and wounded marchers were summarily executed by the roadside as they fell or shot en masse when they became inconvenient.

Accounts of the Korean War often emphasize the Chinese "Lenient Policy" towards POWs. But, though North Korea had a similar policy, American prisoners attested that junior NKPA officers were either unaware of it or completely ignored it. One such officer, dubbed "The Tiger," presided over many death-march executions. Lt. Cordus Thornton, convicted under the "people's justice" system for permitting men to fall behind on the march, responded "In Texas, sir, we would call that a lynching." He was shot in the head and buried by the roadside by fellow prisoners (50).

By the time of the Inchon landing (September 1950) and the Chinese entry into the war, many POWs had already endured the hardships of long marches, strafing by UN aircraft, and dysentery from dreadful hygienic conditions in primitive camps. These dire circumstances help explain the mass deaths and hopelessness of American prisoners. Their susceptibility to propaganda appears to have been comparable to that of British and other UN prisoners. In the context of the Cold War, POWs became powerful propaganda tools and bargaining chips for both sides. As the war in Korea bogged down into a stalemate, the return of prisoners became a central issue in armistice negotiations.

The Chinese subjected their prisoners to "re-education" in Marxist and Maoist principles. In these crude sessions, the "students" were taught about the crimes of imperialism and capitalism and forced to write essays condemning their offenses. Few bought the party line:

Every day we had to go to school. Listen to them tell us how lousy our country was.... They talked about your war mongrels, your big business men, like DuPont and the Rockefellers with plenty of money.... When you look out and see nothing and remember what you had back here in the United States, you couldn't agree with people like that because they had nothing. They'd try to tell us how good they were treating us when eight and ten people were dying every night in this camp. (144)

So much for the "Lenient Policy." Prisoners signed ceasefire petitions or "confessed" that the United States had unleashed germ warfare in Korea—a persistent Soviet-inspired fiction—in order to escape the torture and mistreatment the Chinese inflicted on "reactionaries." All the evidence suggests that such indoctrination efforts failed. But Latham makes a persuasive case that the guards' aim was not necessarily to convert Americans to communism. Instead, the Chinese had introduced a toxic atmosphere of mutual suspicion into the camps by segregating the troops and inducing "progressive" prisoners to inform on their comrades in exchange for food, medical treatment, or other favors. Such measures undermined unit cohesion and made prisoners much easier to control (200).

The confessions of US personnel, often made under duress or to save the lives of others, dogged them after their release. Latham's excellent closing chapter documents the short-term and long-term perceptions of American POWs, including official recriminations, popular culture distortions, and the introduction of a code of conduct meant to guide soldiers in similar circumstances. *Conduct after Capture* figured prominently in America's war in Vietnam.

The book is not without faults. Too much space is devoted to debates over Gen. Douglas MacArthur's leadership and dismissal—American POWs were strongly affected by the former, but very little, if at all, by the latter. Passing references to Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib in the conclusion are out of place and unlikely to satisfy those interested in the broader study of the treatment of POWs. As a Canadian, I was disappointed to see the Battle of Kap'yong (April 1951)—fought by Australian and Canadian troops backed by New Zealand artillery—described as an American and British affair (151).

These are, however, minor complaints. *Cold Days in Hell* is an excellent contribution to the historiography of the Korean War that will appeal to scholars of the conflict, military history enthusiasts, and general readers alike. Its well-paced chapters alternate between front-line action and the agonies and inaction of men made prisoners. Latham's signal achievement here is to have clarified the record of American POWs by recovering the story of the sacrifice and service of these forgotten soldiers of a forgotten war.