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doi:10.1017/S1479591421000565

Prisoners of the empire: inside Japanese POW camps

By Sarah Kovner. Harvard University Press, 2020. p. 328 pages. Hardback, \$35.00, ISBN: 9780674737617

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(Received 31 August 2021; accepted 4 September 2021)

Sarah Kovner's *Prisoners of the Empire: Inside Japanese POW Camps* promises bold revision. She dismisses popular narratives that represent the Allied POW experience as "martyrs to unmitigated cruelty" of guards and camp commanders; downplays the role of the Japanese army's military code that mandated death over surrender; and reminds readers that Allied "friendly fire", torpedo attacks on Japanese transport and bombing of army bases housing POW camps, accounted for a significant number of POW deaths. *Prisoners of the Empire* offers an alternative narrative that locates the staggeringly high mortality and everyday abuse of Allied POWs in historical contingencies that signify nothing about the Japanese as a people or culture. It evidences: slowness in developing guidelines against abuse; civil-military turf battles that obstructed implementation; dispersion of bases over vast geographic expanses making coordination of policy difficult; low quality and poorly trained camp commanders and guards; shortages of food and medicine even for its own army; and logistical challenges which multiplied as the war wore on. Combined with the unanticipated large numbers of Allied soldiers and civilians taken captive early in the war, institutional failings overwhelmed the state's capacity to supervise, feed, and provide medical care to its charges. That's the argument.

At its best, the book rejects representations of the Japanese as uniformly brutal and sadistic and the POW experience as one of unrelenting victimization. Least supportable is Kovner's central claim: "what stands out in the Japanese military's approach to POWs is its *unwitting* [emphasis in the original] cruelty", a conclusion made possible only by an act of denial of ideology in historical explanation that calls to mind Sir John Sealey's – first Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University – claim that Great Britain acquired its global empire in a fit of absentmindedness.

Comparative data on POW mortality in WW II call into question the book's contingency/functionalist explanatory model. Of the 93,000 American POWs held by Germany, somewhat less than 2% died. Over 21,000 Americans became captives of the Imperial Japan Army (IJA), of whom 7,200 or 33% died in captivity. To put the mortality rate in context, during the 5-week battle of Iwo Jima, about 6% of the US fighting force were killed or subsequently died of wounds sustained in battle, the highest ratio of casualties sustained in the Pacific War. In other words, the American soldier who became a POW of the IJA incurred a five-times greater risk of not surviving the war than his peers engaged in frontline combat during the height of the Pacific War. The other Allied Powers did not fare much better. While mortality rates for British and Canadian soldiers were 10% lower, the mortality rate among Australian forces was marginally higher. In World War II, only Soviet soldiers captured by Germany fared worse: 60% mortality, a horrific and long-ignored fact of the European war. The

chasm between the mortality rates of Germany's 'Nordic' POWs and Slavic-Soviet POWs can only be explained by policies flowing from the National Socialist ideology of wartime Germany. As argued below, wartime Japan's own brand of fascism is a necessary explanatory factor in the IJA's treatment of Allied POWs.

Kovner's most defensible argument is that the sheer number and dispersion of IJA POW camps make any generalization about treatment fallible. Over the course of the war, the IJA established no less than 378 camps, large and small. Camps were located in the home islands, formal empire, and wherever Japanese forces occupied territory, stretching from the Aleutian Islands to New Guinea to Burma. To demonstrate the fallacy of generalizing from worst-case POW experiences, *Prisoners'* core chapters present well-researched case studies of four of the larger camps. These indeed reveal a marked difference in treatment and conditions.

Nevertheless, *Prisoners of the Empire's* core argument is indefensible. Kovner asserts in the introduction that her research "reveals that the Japanese government never made it a policy to abuse POWs" (p. 3). The argument holds up only if one accepts the author's arbitrarily narrow definition of government policy.

As Kovner would have it only documents emanating from the civilian bureaucracy count as "policy", a premise whose validity the author herself undercuts when the reader is told that the agency set up to monitor and manage POW camps, the Prisoner of War Management Office (POWMO), "had no command authority and relatively few personnel" and its writ, toothless as it was, extended to only sixteen of the main camps, all on the home islands (pp. 103–4). The agency that exercised command authority in POW matters was the Military Affairs Bureau (MAB). Yet by some alchemy, MAB's directives, whether sending POWs to be worked to death in the jungles of Burma or coal mines in Hokkaido and Kyushu, or to be transported in "hell ships" in which in one case, one-quarter of passengers died, do not constitute government policy.

Kovner devotes four chapters of the book to the case studies of POW camps in Korea, Singapore, Philippines, and Kyushu. Conditions and treatment run the spectrum from the mostly good, camps in the colonial Korean cities of Keijō and Jinsen, to horrendous, Camp O'Donnell in the Philippines, while the Changi camp in Singapore and Fukuoka camp in Kyushu fall somewhere in between. Each case study offers little-known facts assiduously documented that yield insight into factors that influenced conditions and treatment. However problematic the core argument, these chapters make the book a valuable contribution to scholarship on the Pacific War.

The colonial Korean POW camps offer the best counterexample to the "unmitigated cruelty" narrative Kovner seeks to revise. Largely unexamined in the English-language literature, the picture that emerges is edifying. Prisoners were housed in solidly constructed barracks equipped with heating and sanitary facilities; allocated adequate personal living space; warm clothing was lacking but until the last months of the war, food, supplemented by black market purchases and Red Cross parcels, was sufficient to forestall malnutrition; work assignments, which were not backbreaking, were generally welcomed as they came with extra food rations. There was even recreation: prisoners played baseball, read books, and played musical instruments provided by the YMCA and Swiss diplomats. The account of life in the IJA Korean POW camps is well documented, with the great majority of citations linked to archival material.

As Kovner readily acknowledges, however, conditions in the Korean POW camps were the exception: show camps that served the dual purposes of instilling in Korean colonial subjects faith in Japan's coming victory and impressing on domestic and international audiences that Japan was treating prisoners humanely. Accordingly, the International Committee of the Red Cross was allowed frequent visits and Japanese journalists produced stories and newsreels showing happy and well-fed inmates. Conditions worsened after 1943 when the War Ministry began censoring all reports, apparently concerned showing prisoners "too well or too cruelly treated" was bad for public morale (p. 131). Nevertheless, conditions and treatment remained better than elsewhere. The Korean camps' inmates were the fortunate few.

A ubiquitous condition of Allied captivity was corporal punishment for minor rules infractions. Even at the model Korean camps, physical abuse was a daily occurrence. Atypical but not a rare occurrence either was the punishment of a British private accused of stealing an apple who “was made to stand at attention and punched until almost unconscious” (p. 130).

Corporal punishment of POWs was constant and as likely to occur in best-case as in worst-case camps. How, then, does Korver square this fact with the assertion that cruelty toward POWs was “unwitting”? Citing the role of shame/honor played in corporal punishment in IJA’s training of its own soldiers, Kovner argues, “notions of honor and manhood” made Japanese guards believe POWs would prefer the pain of a beating to the dishonor of a citation for misconduct (p. 60). Among other problems with this line of argument is that Kovner, who denies “national character” explanations for the bad stuff, invokes it when useful to her own purposes. A more serious objection, however, is that “good intentions” is the self-serving and duplicitous defense mounted by abusers and institutions that tolerate and promote socialized forms of domination. And what is the evidence? The document Kovner cites is testimony of high-ranking IJA officers gathered late in the war, which suggests exculpatory motives.

In Chapter 9, the last chapter of *Prisoners*, Kovner changes tactics and evokes the “people living in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones” rhetorical strategy. British and American violations of the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of POWs are not widely known. Following Japan’s surrender, British commanders in Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam south of the 17th parallel conscripted Japanese POWs into labor details and pacification campaigns to reinstate colonial rule. Some were not repatriated until mid-1946. Despite good treatment afforded America POWs by Germany, over a million German POWs confined in the Rhine Meadow camp “were not accorded POW status or allowed ICR visits. They were kept in open enclosures, with no shelter, and limited to a diet of 1,200–1,500 calories a day. Some 32,000 died in just 3 months” (p. 209). Kovner also makes sharp and well-sustained criticisms of Allied war crime trials in Chapter 8, “Undue Process”. Chapter 7, “Endings and Beginnings”, discusses lessons of the Pacific War POW experience not heeded in the 1949 rewriting of the Geneva Convention rules of warfare and treatment of POWs. These chapters are highly recommended.

For Americans aware of torture, assassinations, ‘black sites’, and other egregious human rights violations of the US ‘war on terror’, righteous criticism of Japanese treatment of Allied POWs is simply arrogance. Readers can applaud Kovner’s mission to show brutality was not “inherent in Japanese character or culture” while rejecting the argument the horrors inflicted on Allied POWs, e.g., slave-like forced labor on the Thai-Burma railroad and in Hokkaido and Kyushu coal mines; the Bataan Death March; fatal medical experiments on POWs in Manchuria and Kyushu; routine beatings and not infrequent shootings of captives, were not a matter of policy. Those responsible for death and abuse were not rogue actors but military officials acting in the chain of command.

There is a compelling explanation for the brutal treatment of Allied POWs that does not impute Japanese as a race or culture: fascism. Despite historical differences in political process that produced the Japanese and European varieties of fascism, Japan’s wartime ideology embodied essential elements of German National Socialism and Italian Fascism: race-based nationalism, reverence for the state, absolute obedience to a supreme leader, glorification of war, subordination of the individual to the ethnic nation. Indoctrinated to believe that the Pacific War was a ‘sacred war’ to preserve and extend Imperial sovereignty by liberating Asians from the yoke of Western colonialism, soldiers and civilians willingly sacrificed their lives. A mere 206 Japanese soldiers were taken prisoner out of a fighting force of 20,000 at the Battle of Iwo Jima. On Saipan, hundreds of Japanese women, many clutching their children, jump to their death to preserve their ‘purity’ in advance of the US landing. During the Battle of Okinawa, civilians hiding in caves who did not commit suicide to avoid capture were shot by soldiers under orders to protect them. Schoolchildren, housewives, and the elderly trained with sharpened bamboo staves in anticipation of invasion of the home islands. When Japan’s wartime ideology put so little value on the lives of Imperial subjects, the killing and brutalization of enemy POWs followed as a matter of course.

The conceptual error of *Prisoners of the Empire* is the failure to acknowledge the military was Japan's wartime government and it enjoyed the broad support of political parties, civil bureaucrats, and most of the population. The policies drawn up by the legal-minded bureaucrats Kovner puts at the center of her study are mostly a historical curiosity. In the end, *Prisoners of the Empire*, at least in the academic literature on Japanese treatment of POWs, is only modestly revisionist

doi:10.1017/S1479591421000541

The Bangladesh Garment Industry and the Global Supply Chain: Choices and Constraints of Management

Shahidur Rahman. Routledge, 2021. 170 pages. Hardback, £120.00, ISBN: 9780367709693. Ebook, £33.29, ISBN: 9781003153238.

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(Received 27 June 2022; accepted 27 June 2022)

Shahidur Rahman's *The Bangladesh Garment Industry and the Global Supply Chain* provides a comprehension overview of Bangladesh's current ready-made garment (RMG) sector from a management viewpoint. Based on a broad and meticulous survey of numerous garment factories, the author depicts the industry's organic structure and suggests how it can be made more sustainable.

The RMG sector in Bangladesh has been growing since its inception in the 1980s, but the country's path to becoming one of the world's largest suppliers of apparel goods (second after China) cannot be praised as one of uninterrupted commercial success. Countless violations of safety regulations have produced a troubling record of worker injury and death, the best-known case being the Rana Plaza accident in 2013, which took more than 1,100 lives and is one of the worst industrial tragedies in living memory. Because of this, improvement in matters of compliance has become an urgent issue, with stakeholders engaging in the development of stronger safety standards and their strict enforcement.

As a result of Rana Plaza, two transnational initiatives, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, were established to monitor building safety in the sector. The Accord and Alliance (AA) were regarded as "groundbreaking" or "game-changing" regulatory frameworks, as they were the first multi-stakeholder and legally binding agreements implemented to raise safety levels in Bangladesh garment factories. However, 8 years after the Rana Plaza accident (the year this book was published), the AA regime expired, with the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC), which was formed through an initiative of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), taking over the mission of improving working conditions and safety.¹

Now that sufficient time has passed to evaluate the changes brought by AA, questions must be asked, such as "To what extent did AA make Bangladesh's RMG sector more compliant and sustainable?" International discourse concerning the effectiveness of AA has been ongoing for some time but has reached no conclusion, making this book essential reading. Rahman's most significant contributions are his holistic understanding of the influence of AA and actual resulting change, and his

¹The Alliance ceased operation in 2018. The Accord was extended for 2 years beyond the length of the original agreement, and ended in 2020.