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The exchange of prisoners of war as a site of ideological confrontation during the Korean war

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Abstract. The Korean War (25.06.1950–27.07.1953) represents a multifaceted conflict of the Cold War era, in which the national interests of the two Korean states, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK), became intricately intertwined with the interests of major powers — the USSR, the USA, and the People's Republic of China (PRC). From the very outbreak of the war on June 25, 1950, various proposals for achieving peace and restoring the status quo were put forward at the United Nations. However, for various reasons, the war became protracted. Truce talks commenced in July 1951 and concluded only two years later with the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement. One of the reasons for the prolonged negotiations was the disagreement between the sides regarding the exchange of prisoners of war. The aim of this study is to examine how the ideological confrontation between the sides of the military conflict (the USA and the ROK versus the DPRK, the PRC, and the USSR) influenced the negotiations on the POWs exchange and the subsequent treatment of repatriated prisoners in their home countries (on the examples of American and British POWs). As a result of the research, the author concludes that tens of thousands of POWs became object of ideological propaganda and manipulation by both the United States, commanding the UN forces, and the DPRK and the PRC. The ideological confrontation between the sides emerged as one of the primary factors of tension within the prisoner-of-war camps, threatening the lives and safety of the captives.

Keywords: DPRK, Republic of Korea, ideology, Cold War

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Обмен военнопленными как арена идеологической борьбы в годы Корейской войны

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Аннотация. Корейская война (25.06.1950–27.07.1953) является многоплановым конфликтом эпохи холодной войны, в котором национальные интересы двух корейских государств, КНДР и Республики Корея (РК), оказались сложным образом переплетены с интересами крупнейших держав — СССР, США, КНР. С самого начала войны 25 июня 1950 г. в ООН выдвигались разные предложения по достижению мира и возвращению ситуации в статус-кво. Но по разным причинам война затянулась. Переговоры о перемирии стартовали в июле 1951 г., а завершились только 2 года спустя подписанием соглашения. Одной из причин затягивания переговоров было несогласие сторон по вопросу обмена военнопленными. Цель исследования — выяснить, каким образом идеологическое противостояние сторон военного конфликта (США, РК — КНДР, КНР, СССР) повлияло на переговоры по обмену военнопленными и дальнейшее отношение к военнопленным на родине после их репатриации (на примере американских и британских военнопленных). В результате исследования автор приходит к выводу, что десятки тысяч военнопленных стали объектом идеологической пропаганды и манипуляции со стороны как США, командующими силами ООН, так и — КНДР и КНР. Идеологическое противостояние сторон стало одним из главных факторов напряжения внутри лагерей, угрожая жизни и безопасности военнопленных.

Ключевые слова: КНДР, Республика Корея, идеология, холодная война

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Introduction

The Korean War (June 25, 1950 — July 27, 1953) was a complex Cold War conflict in which the national aspirations of North and South Korea became deeply entangled with the strategic interests of the major powers — namely the Soviet Union, the United States, and China. When first US-led UN forces then Chinese volunteers entered the war, it effectively pushed back the two Koreas in settling the conflict, which started as a blitzkrieg by the Korean People's Army (KPA) to annex South Korea and unify Korea by force. World historiography has accumulated a huge bulk of research on the Korean War, making it an impossible task for a single researcher to cover all those, especially within the framework of a scientific article. At the same time, there are still some aspects of the Korean War that require further study and systematization, especially in the light of new research goals, particularly relevant from the perspective of Russian historiography. The problem of prisoners of war (POW) was one of major contentious issues in the armistice negotiations between the Chinese-North Korean and American delegations.

From the moment the war broke out on June 25, 1950, the UN was advancing a series of diplomatic initiatives aimed at brokering peace and reinstating the pre-war status quo. However, for various reasons the war dragged on, and it was not until July 10, 1951 that negotiations on a truce began in Kason. In October of the same year, they continued in Panmunjom, where on July 27, 1953 a truce agreement was signed¹. One of the reasons why negotiations faltered was major disagreements between the parties on the issue of prisoner exchange. This paper examines the topic of prisoner exchange through the prism of the ideological confrontation among the direct parties to the conflict and their allies: the United States, South Korea, North Korea, China, and the Soviet Union.

The research aims to determine how ideological confrontation between the parties affected the negotiations on the prisoner exchange, terms of their detention and release (as exemplified by American and British POWs). The study is limited to a narrow aspect of a much broader POW problem. Issues such as POW internment, creation of camps, detention conditions, POW deaths in camps, and details of prisoner exchange discussions as part of armistice negotiations are beyond the scope of this study. The author takes a humanitarian stance on the issue maintaining impartiality by refraining from defending either belligerent party — both of whom bear culpability for

¹ Armistice Agreement. United Nations. URL: <https://peacemaker.un.org> (retrieved on 25.09.2025).

protracted hostilities and resultant fatalities among prisoners of war in camps. The study is based on US foreign policy documents, UN documents, memoirs of former POWs, TASS reports (SARF).

On the Number of POWs

Throughout the negotiations in Panmunjom the sides repeatedly exchanged information on the number of prisoners of war detained by each belligerent. The first data exchange occurred in December 1951. Mutual mistrust between the parties often prompted skepticism regarding credibility of the data. The North Korean delegation provided a list of 11,559 UN prisoners of war, of whom 7,142 were South Korean soldiers and 3,198 were American military personnel². The American side contested the figures based on their own intelligence on UN prisoner tallies. As reported by General Ridgway, UN Forces Commander in Korea, North Korea provided inconsistent data on UN prisoners of war: “Communist GHQ releases say one thing radio something else, and delegates another thing. The Communist GHQ officially announced that from 25 June to 25 Dec 50, Communists captured 38,500 POW, from 26 Dec to 25 Mar, 26,863. In the first half of the war 65,363 POW. On the basis of official figures for first 9 months alone Communists have failed to account for well over 50,000 POW. These are not MIA figures, but official Communists governmental figures. Where are the missing”³. North Korea responded by saying that they did not have as many prisoners of war as the UNC, since they release them in front, and that the UN Command is actually underestimating the number of released POWs; it is also necessary to take into account those who died in air raids or of illness, and those who deserted⁴. The UN command confirmed the release of 177 UN soldiers who returned from the front line, but no more than that.

In turn, North Korea accused the Americans of providing information on POWs, different from that submitted by the UNC to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in June 1951. In particular, they mentioned that the list provided by UNC was short by 44,259 names of which 34,786 are from the regular army, whereas the UN command had initially sent to Geneva

² The Commander in Chief, Far East (Ridgway) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. 25 December 1951. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951. Volume VII. URL: https://db.history.go.kr/contemp/level.do?levelId=frus_007_0070_1430 (retrieved on: 25.09.2025).

³ The Commander in Chief, Far East (Ridgway) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. 24 December 1951. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951. Volume VII. URL: https://db.history.go.kr/contemp/level.do?levelId=frus_007_0070_1390 (retrieved on: 25.09.2025).

⁴ Ibid.

a list of 150,476 names⁵. North Korea requested an explanation. The UN command replied that “current list includes 132,474 broken down by nationality as follows: NK 95,531, Chinese 20,700, ROK 16,243. The last named were domiciled on 25 June 1950 south of 38 parallel. They were for the most part apprehended by UNC forces under suspicious or hostile circumstances. Some were guerrillas, some fighting with NK army; some were taken into custody as a security measure, others through the confusion of war”⁶.

Following a careful screening of all POWs conducted by the UNC in early November 1951, 37,500 people were identified as former civilians who had been residing south of the 38th parallel at the time of their detention. “The screening process and investigation of all individuals detained in UN POW camps disclosed the presence of many persons whose detention was attributable to various accidental circumstances attendant upon the confusion inseparable from hostilities and the consequent displacement of large masses of the civ population”⁷. North Korea tried to refute this statement largely on the grounds that it was not a question of where these persons lived but of what side they were fighting for, and suggested all-for-all exchange⁸. ROK citizens are known to have been forcibly conscripted into the KNA during the “liberation” of the occupied territories of South Korea, a practice that is evidenced by the results of POWs reclassification in UN camps. In turn, the Americans expressed bewilderment as to how it was possible to apply the all-for-all principle when there were approximately 130,000 POWs under the UNC control in need of further verification, while the KNA only had 12,000.

During the Korean War (July 25, 1950 — July 28, 1953), UN forces captured a total of 171,498 POWs, of whom 150,420 belonged to the KPA and 21,074 were Chinese People’s Volunteers [1. P. 183]. However, this total number of prisoners does not take into account their above-mentioned reclassification. Therefore, following the armistice negotiations by July 1953, approximately 132,000 UNC prisoners and 13,000 KPA prisoners were subject to exchange.

⁵ The Commander in Chief, United Nations Command (Ridgway) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. 22 December 1951. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951. Volume VII. URL: https://db.history.go.kr/contemp/level.do?levelId=frus_007_0070_1290 (retrieved on: 26.09.2025).

⁶ The Commander in Chief, United Nations Command (Ridgway) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. 23 December, 1951. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951. Volume VII. URL: https://db.history.go.kr/contemp/level.do?levelId=frus_007_0070_1320 (retrieved on: 26.09.2025).

⁷ The Commander in Chief, Far East (Ridgway) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 21 December, 1951. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951. Volume VII. URL: https://db.history.go.kr/contemp/level.do?levelId=frus_007_0070_1180 (retrieved on: 26.09.2025).

⁸ The Commander in Chief, United Nations Command (Ridgway) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. 23 December, 1951. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951. Volume VII. URL: https://db.history.go.kr/contemp/level.do?levelId=frus_007_0070_1320 (retrieved on: 26.09.2025).

Voluntary Repatriation: Pro and Contra

The UN Command had been considering various options for POW exchange⁹ before they ultimately settled on the voluntary repatriation principle. On January 2, 1952, the US delegation in Panmunjom proposed the concept of voluntary repatriation and a one-for-one exchange. The proposal was immediately rejected by North Korea, primarily as inconsistent with the 1949 Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War. The US, a signatory to the 1949 Geneva Convention, had not ratified it by the start of the Korean War. The DPRK and the PRC were not even signatories to the convention, but agreed to follow it in the warfare. In any case, both sides officially adhered to the provisions of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war.

Under Article 118 of the Geneva Convention, “prisoners of war shall be released and repatriated without delay after the cessation of active hostilities.”¹⁰ In other words, the convention did not provide for “voluntary repatriation,” as the Americans wanted. However, the following paragraph of the same article states that “in the absence of stipulations to the above effect in any agreement concluded between the Parties to the conflict with a view to the cessation of hostilities, or failing any such agreement, each of the Detaining Powers shall itself establish and execute without delay a plan of repatriation in conformity with the principle laid down in the foregoing paragraph.”¹¹ In other words, the convention established the protocol for repatriation, based on the consensus between the parties involved, which could theoretically allow for another principle. However, the convention’s guiding principle implied mandatory and immediate repatriation of all prisoners of war by the conflicting parties. According to the Geneva Convention, only those wounded or sick were permitted to refuse repatriation, albeit with certain exceptions (Article 109). This article does not contradict Articles 7 and 118, referred to by the DPRK, the PRC, and their primary ideological ally, the USSR.

The idea of voluntary repatriation was initially put forward by the US State Department, while the Department of Defense did not immediately endorse it. Secretary of State Acheson stated that the US were paying greater attention to humanitarian aspects of repatriation, given the repression experienced by many

⁹ The Commander in Chief, Far East (Ridgway) to the Advance Headquarters, United Nations Command, Korea. 23 December, 1951. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951. Volume VII. URL: https://db.history.go.kr/contemp/level.do?levelId=frus_007_0070_1340 (retrieved on: 26.09.2025).

¹⁰ Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners Of War of August 12, 1949. UN. Conventions and Agreements. URL: https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/geneva_prisoners_4.shtml (retrieved on: 01.10.2025).

¹¹ Ibid.

Soviet prisoners of war released after German surrender¹². American politicians appealed to the POWs right to refuse repatriation as an expression of humanism and freedom. In this sense, the decisions made were guided not by the literal interpretation of the Geneva Convention, but rather, by the spirit of the document, known for its profoundly humanistic nature. However, it would be unwise to believe that American politicians proposed voluntary repatriation exceptionally out of empathy for the prisoners of war. At the time, international law stipulated for forced repatriation, and from a practical perspective, it was in the US best interests to repatriate all prisoners of war immediately after hostilities ceased. This would ensure that the UNC was no longer responsible for accommodation and provisions for those who refused to repatriate.

It appears that US decision to opt for voluntary repatriation was primarily politically motivated. A key factor was US strategic goal to achieve ideological superiority over its adversaries by offering anti-communist POWs the option to remain in the Republic of Korea or relocate to Taiwan. UN forces had captured approximately 90% of North Korean and Chinese POWs by December 1951, i.e. before the proposal of voluntary repatriation was even put on the table. By this time, the Americans were already aware that 50–70% of Chinese POWs were former Kuomintang members who had surrendered in the hope of being repatriated to Taiwan [1. P. 184]. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the North Korean POWs adhered to anti-communist beliefs¹³. Given the unequal ratio of prisoners of war between the opposing sides, potential costs of voluntary repatriation for the US and its allies were extremely low. While there were tens of thousands of POWs from the DPRK and the PRC, UN POWs did not number more than 13,000, including South Korean military personnel. As the history of prisoner exchanges discussed below would show, only a few American and British POWs refused repatriation, in a stark contrast to tens of thousands of North Korean and Chinese prisoners, many of whom subsequently joined the armed forces of the Republic of Korea and Taiwan.

¹² Acheson D. *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company; 1969. P. 653.

¹³ Following the POW screening in UN camps in July 1952, it emerged that of the 169,944 prisoners, 50.7% opposed repatriation to the DPRK and the PRC: among Chinese People's Volunteers — 68.5% (14,251), those from North Korea — 35.6% (34,196), those from South Korea — 71.2% (11,622), and detained civilians — 72% (26,153). The screening results exceeded American expectations: they had assumed that, for example, around 15% of the Chinese volunteers would refuse repatriation, but the figure turned out to be nearly 70%. This caused concern within the US State Department, as it could have led to serious political problems related to the ongoing negotiations and the image of the UN command due to growing rumors of violence in prisoner-of-war camps [1. P. 188–189].

The principle of voluntary repatriation sparked debate among military and political figures in the United States, as there was no unanimous position on the issue. In this regard, I would like to quote a comment by Carl E. Lundin, a member of the Bars of Connecticut and an employee of the Admiralty Division of the Office of the Judge Advocate General of the US Navy 1953. In one of his articles, he stated that the authors of the Geneva Convention could not have foreseen that in the next major military conflict, thousands of prisoners of war would not wish repatriation to their homeland [2. P. 561]. While acknowledging the conformity of the Communists' position with international law on the exchange of prisoners of war, Lundin noted that the law was not static, but was developing dynamically in response to new phenomena. The Cold War saw the opposing sides engaged in armed conflict as well as in ideological confrontation, a struggle to win the hearts and minds of the people. Lundin thus suggested that, in the new international circumstances, the POWs views could change, especially since the USSR and the US were on opposite sides in the Korean War, unlike in World War II, when they were allies in the fight against fascism. The 1949 Geneva Convention was adopted with the specific aim of resolving pressing issues that had arisen in the treatment of prisoners of war following the end of World War II.

It was not until the spring of 1953 that the issue of POW repatriation resolved. North Korea and China feared that voluntary repatriation could morally discredit their military forces, with the majority of their servicemen opting for non-repatriation under political pressure they were exposed to in UN camps. According to Y.V. Vanin, North Korea and China rejected the principle of voluntary repatriation, “not without a reason seeing it as a possibility of ideological pressure on captured KNA soldiers and Chinese people’s volunteers, halting their return to their former service” [3. P. 236]. Secondly, during the armistice negotiations, this issue prompted differences between Kim Il Sung on the one hand and Mao Zedong and Stalin on the other. Having initially adopted a tough stance of unanimous opposition to the US proposal on POW exchange, the Chinese-North Korean side came to accuse the UNC of “forcibly detaining” their POWs and of using violence, even to the point of killing prisoners in UN camps¹⁴.

¹⁴ At a meeting held on 30 May 1952 in Panmunjom, General Nam Il, head of the Sino-North Korean delegation, strongly criticized the UNC for acts of violence against Chinese and Korean prisoners of war. He accused the Americans of inhumane treatment of prisoners of war, mass bloodshed, refusal to provide food, and, in general, of violating the principles of the Geneva Convention. Transcript of Proceedings, Seventieth Session, 44th Meeting at Pan Mun Jom, Military Armistice Conference, 30 May 1952. 휴전회담 회의록 2 : 제27-158차 판문점 본회의 기록 (1951.10.25–1953.7.19) [Armistice Talks Records, Volume 2: Records of the 27th–158th Panmunjom Plenary Sessions (1951.10.25–1953.7.19)]. URL: https://db.history.go.kr/contemp/level.do?levelId=pn_002_0440 (retrieved on: 03.10.2025).

In February 1952, when the Americans began what the North Koreans saw as “unauthorized” POW screening for consent to repatriation to the DPRK and the PRC, formally presented as a count of those to be repatriated, North Korea’s indignation at the negotiations was further fueled.

As the situation on the front lines evolved, Kim Il Sung and Mao Zedong gradually adopted a more flexible stance and made concessions. On 5 March 1952, the Chinese-North Korean delegation withdrew its demand for the return of 37,000 KNA soldiers recruited from among the citizens of the Republic of Korea. On 27 March 1957, they announced that they would not demand the repatriation of prisoners of war whose place of origin was in another country [4. P. 52]. At the same time, they remained firmly opposed to the concept of voluntary repatriation. On 13 July 1952, the Americans proposed an exchange of 83,000 KPA POWs and Chinese People’s Volunteers who agreed to repatriation to the DPRK and the PRC, following screening in UN camps. Due to substantial infrastructure destruction and civilian casualties caused by the American air strikes on North Korean power plants and cities, Kim Il Sung felt compelled to negotiate an exchange. However, Mao opposed such a concession. Of the total number of POWs to be exchanged, only 23% were Chinese volunteers, with the rest being KPA soldiers [4. P. 55]. Mao sent Kim Il Sung a cable describing the US proposal as an attempt to “sow discord” between China and North Korea. He believed that accepting this proposal would put North Korea at a military and political disadvantage. He believed that the war should continue, as this would tie down the main forces of American imperialism and cause them to suffer continuous losses in the East. Concurrently, the Soviet Union, a global proponent of peace, could fortify its position and exert its influence on the revolutionary movements across nations. This would result in a delay in the onset of a new world war [5. P. 112]. Mao expressed his commitment to assisting the Korean people in addressing their challenges. Following Stalin’s endorsement of Mao’s stance, Kim Il Sung found himself compelled to concur.

On 18 September 1952, the KNA and Chinese People’s Volunteers launched an offensive, resulting in a temporary suspension of negotiations. On 22 February 1953, UN Commander General Clark proposed to start with repatriating sick and badly wounded POWs. However, at that time, Mao was not inclined to making any concessions. He believed in a “policy of struggle and negotiation”, which involved resolving issues through negotiations on favorable terms. Following extensive deliberations, he reluctantly consented to Clark’s proposal and voluntary repatriation under the pressure from the Soviet Union, which insisted on a truce [5. P. 119–122].

In modern historiography, it is widely accepted that Stalin’s death on 5 March 1953 was a primary factor in resolving all outstanding differences between the

parties involved in the armistice negotiations [3. P. 244]. It is my belief that this was a key factor in achieving the armistice in 1953, but only from the perspective of a broader context of prior events and relations between the PRC, the DPRK, and the USSR. Stalin's death and further change in the Soviet policy on the war in Korea under the new government made it possible to reach a compromise on POW exchange, previously called for by the US and North Korea, but delayed by China and the USSR for various reasons.

On 2 April 1953, Kim-Il Sung, Chairman of the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, sent a telegram to Lester B. Pearson, Chairman of the 7th Session of the UN General Assembly, requesting to distribute it among the delegations of all countries, except for the delegation of the Republic of China (Taiwan). In this telegram, Kim Il Sung expressed his support for Zhou Enlai's statement of 30 March 1953 regarding the principle of voluntary repatriation¹⁵. Zhou Enlai's statement of 30 March and that by Kim Il Sung of 31 March (the telegram to GA UN was based on both statements) clearly stated that China and the DPRK agreed to the proposal of UNC Commander-in-Chief General Clark regarding the exchange of sick and wounded POWs, as well as voluntary repatriation in general, but on condition that those who refused immediate repatriation would be transferred to a "neutral state to ensure a fair resolution of the issue of their repatriation."¹⁶ The Soviet Union officially endorsed China and North Korea's proposal. Consequently, on April 11, 1953, an agreement on the exchange of badly wounded and sick prisoners of war was signed in Panmunjom, and the first exchange took place.

Awareness-Raising Programs in POW Camps

Conditions of detention require separate consideration. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper, therefore, the author will limit himself to the question of how ideological confrontation affected conditions of POWs detention in camps. For the first time in military history, prisoners of war were exposed to serious ideological indoctrination: North Korean camps highlighted the accomplishments of socialist countries, while UN camps emphasized the merits of Western democracy. These programs per se would not have posed a threat to the lives of prisoners of war, had they not provoked contradictions between the prisoners and camp administration or between the prisoners themselves. Some prisoners were more loyal to camp propaganda, others put up resistance, for which they were punished or fined (In North Korea) [6. P. 199–206]. UN camps regarded POW participation

¹⁵ SARF. P4459-27-14605. P. 172.

¹⁶ Ibid. P. 192–193.

in political programs as an expression of their refusal to repatriate, which could directly endanger the life and safety of a prisoner. This was particularly the case if there were groups of prisoners in his compound who supported repatriation (“communists”). As set out in the Geneva Convention, attendance at educational programs for prisoners of war should be strictly voluntary. However, the situation varied from camp to camp.

POW camps in North Korea were partly run by the Chinese administration (the Chinese People’s Volunteers Command) and partly by the North Korean administration (the Korean People’s Army). All prisoner-of-war camps were located in the DPRK, up to the Yalu River except one — the so-called Mukden camp, near the modern city of Shenyang, Liaoning Province.

The Chinese administration pursued a policy of leniency towards prisoners of war, a practice formally observed in all camps in North Korea. The policy was based on four key principles: 1) safety of life; 2) preservation of personal belongings; 3) guarantees against harsh treatment and abuse; 4) medical care for the wounded and sick¹⁷. Propagandist materials on UN prisoners of war published in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) throughout this period always emphasized humane and generous nature of the lenient policy¹⁸. The materials featured numerous photographs of POWs smiling, clad in warm clothes, writing letters to their families and appeals to the UN, etc.¹⁹ It was believed that UN military personnel had been misled by their respective governments and would therefore be forgiven for their crimes if they repented.

In order to repurpose the “students”, as the Chinese administration referred to prisoners of war, a significant proportion of their time in the camps was dedicated to propaganda and study. The primary focus was on ordinary soldiers, rather than officers, who, due to their education and relevant training, were more challenging to persuade or recruit. All prisoners of war were required to participate in a parade that commenced at 6:00 a.m. This parade took place across the camp square and served to inform prisoners on the achievements of communism. Throughout the day, a significant amount of time was dedicated to the dissemination of propaganda among prisoners of war. Those who were receptive to the ideas of peace, solidarity and socialism were given food, cigarettes and various privileges, and were labelled “progressives”, while those who reacted negatively to the lessons of communism

¹⁷ United Nations’ P.O.W.’S in Korea. Chinese People’s Committee for World Peace. Peking, China; 1953. P. 3.

¹⁸ Our Fight for Peace. The U.S.-British War Prisoner’s Peace Organization in Korea. Pyongyang: The “New Korea” Press; 1951.

¹⁹ American POWs Calling from Korea. Peking: Foreign Languages Press; 1951.

were called “reactionaries”. The latter were subjected to torture and punishment in the form of prolonged confinement in “sweat boxes” measuring approximately 1 m high, 1.5 m long, and 0.6 m wide [7. P. 79].

Propaganda effort culminated in the “Olympic Games” held from November 15 to 27, 1952, in Byeokdong (DPRK) among prisoners of war. It was the year when the Summer Olympic Games were held in Helsinki. The Chinese camp administration was willing to hold a similar sporting event among POWs in order to further unite them around the ideas of peace, solidarity, and communism that they were promoting. The POWs were grouped in teams by country. Other prisoners formed the groups of performing artists to entertain the “athletes” with songs, dances, and comedy shows. The games proved to be a large and impressive event. A number of banners bearing communist slogans had been on display throughout Byeokdong to ensure the event’s grandeur, despite the fact that they were held in the midst of war with prisoners as participants. In an effort to create a convincing narrative, the North Korean authorities invited foreign journalists to cover the sporting events^{20, 21}.

Shortly before armistice negotiations started, a peace movement was initiated in North Korean and Chinese encampments. On June 30, 1951, the Organization for the Peace of American and British Prisoners of War (OPPW) was established with two principal objectives: information and education (indoctrination). Its Central Committee was issuing a newspaper published on a fortnightly basis, which offered a variety of material, including world news, reports from the front, letters and appeals from prisoners of war. The Central Committee saw the newspaper as a key tool to keep UN POWs informed on global developments, with a particular focus on the situation in Korea. Its educational task was to discuss the matters of war, detention and peace with POWs to convince them of aggressive intentions of the UN forces and the ROK army and make them supporters of the peace movement. The Central Committee worked closely with the Korean National Army and the Chinese volunteers’ command, meaning that all materials published on behalf of the organization were subject to strict censorship [7. P. 92].

Propaganda effort was carried out in UN camps in South Korea too, but on a significantly smaller scale. In April 1951, the UN Command established the Information and Education Office (IEO), entrusted with the implementation

²⁰ Felton M. War Zone — POW Camp, Korea 1952. 15 August, 2012. Military History Matters. URL: <https://www.military-history.org/feature/war-zone-pow-camp-korea-1952.htm> (retrieved on: 15.10.2025).

²¹ Horspool E. The “Reactionaries”: Buck, Hollis, Madden, Parker and Gwyther. 18 June, 2020. Australian War Memorial. URL: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/the-reactionaries> (retrieved on: 15.10.2025).

of educational programs in prisoner-of-war camps. The program commenced in June of that year in camps on Geoje island and in addition to promoting Western democracy and its advantages, it offered vocational training (teaching carpentry and blacksmithing skills, shoe repair, clothing sewing, bricklaying), agricultural training and practice (instruction in farming), reading and writing lessons, recreational activities (singing, movies, playing musical instruments, etc.), physical education, reading in the library, and further school education for those under the age of 19 who had been forced to drop school due to military service [8. P. 21–23]. The program comprised four hours of weekly classes on democracy and UN objectives in Korea, as well as daily radio broadcasts of news, entertainment programs, and instruction. The radio broadcasts were aired directly from the camps but also included South Korean radio programs.

As the Americans began screening POWs on the matter of repatriation, the situation in the UN camps grew increasingly tense, which ultimately made it impossible to implement the IEO programs on a stable and safe basis. The prisoners divided into two groups: “communists” and “anti-communists” — supporters and opponents of repatriation, respectively. The groups often clashed with each other or the guard units [9]²². On 18 February 1952, military units of the US 25th Division entered Block 62 for the repatriation screening. The prisoners of war resisted, wielding improvised weapons that they had prepared in advance²³. More than 1,000 prisoners of war mounted an attack on the guards, prompting the latter to return fire. According to various estimates, the death toll of prisoners of war was between 55 and 77, with dozens more sustaining serious wounds²⁴. One American soldier was also killed and 38 were wounded. In March of that same year, a further clash occurred, resulting in 12 deaths among the POWs.

The riots in the UN camps reached a peak in May 1952, when a group of POWs captured the camp commander, Brigadier General Francis Dodd (Geoje Island). The prisoners demanded that the general publicly acknowledge that UN security forces had used violence in the camps. General C.F. Colson, Dodd’s temporary replacement, was compelled to make a statement 72 hours later, acknowledging the facts of violence against prisoners of war and pledging not to commit any more bloodshed. Then the hostage was released [10. P. 130]²⁵.

²² Peters R, Li X. *Voices from the Korean War: Personal Stories of American, Korean, and Chinese Soldiers*. Lexington : University Press of Kentucky; 2004.

²³ 고제포로수요소 [The prisoner-of-war camp on Geoje Island]. URL: <https://www.kh.or.kr/brd/board/741/L/menu/740?brdType=R&thisPage=1&bbIdx=102580&searchField=&searchText=> (дата обращения: 10.10.2025). (In Korean).

²⁴ Acheson D. Op. cit. P. 654.

²⁵ It is important to note that the matter did not end with General Dodd’s release. The POW riot was quelled by American paratroopers who entered the camp.

Following the hostage crisis, educational programs in UN camps were rolled back to cover only those who had previously refused repatriation. This was clearly a necessary measure, as it brought about a significant reduction in conflict in the camps that housed “communists”, who wished to be repatriated and consequently resisted American and South Korean propaganda. Under the provisions of Geneva Convention, participation in such programs was voluntary. In this regard, the Americans’ decision to reduce the POWs participation in educational programs did not constitute a violation. From May 1952 to June 1953, 69,998 prisoners of war attended classes on democracy. A significant number of POWs attended classes in reading and writing (42,000), agriculture (13,674), and health (15,007) [8. P. 30].

Repatriation and Outreach Work with Prisoners of War

One can identify three distinct periods in the history of prisoner exchange and repatriation in the Korean War. The first is known as Little Switch — an exchange of sick and wounded prisoners from April to May 1953. It involved 684 UN servicemen, 5,640 North Koreans and 1,030 Chinese volunteers. The second period — Big Switch — spanned from August to December 1953 and saw the largest POW exchange in the conflict. The Chinese-North Korean side handed over 12,773 UN prisoners of war, while the UN command handed over 75,823 Korean and Chinese POWs²⁶. In September 1953, 22,604 Korean and Chinese prisoners who refused immediate repatriation were transferred under the control of the Neutral Repatriation Commission. The third phase spans from September 1953 to January 1954, a period when the Neutral Repatriation Commission was in operation. During this period, a small number of Chinese and North Korean POWs returned to their homeland with significant scores of prisoners transferred back under the control of the UN Command, the party that had captured them.

Unexpectedly for both negotiating parties, including the US and the UNC²⁷, President Syngman Rhee (1948–1960) of the Republic of Korea announced his decision to release “anti-communist prisoners of war” before the official exchange under the armistice agreement. On 18 June 1953, President Syngman Rhee issued a decree releasing 26,000 prisoners of war from various camps in South Korea (Busan, Gwangju, Onsan, Bupyeong, Yeoncheon, Daegu). South Korean authorities and media have referred to them as “anti-communist patriotic prisoners of war” (*bangong aeguk po*).

²⁶ The Korean War and the American Red Cross. P. 7. URL: https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/National/history-korean-war.pdf?srsId=AfmBOorLcf1zanJbe3jHJktX4n-1kF_IuHl3AkAH0EGjCPluFqkyxwk (retrieved on: 10.10.2025).

²⁷ Donga Ilbo, 20.06.1953.

In order to accommodate them in South Korea, the government introduced special assistance measures to ensure their safety. A few days after their release on Jeju Island in Camp No. 21, the “anti-communist Chinese prisoners of war” organized a mass rally demanding immediate release for themselves. The camp housed approximately 5,000 to 6,000 Chinese POWs. A UNC representative on Prisoner of War Affairs also confirmed that on learning about the release of Korean POWs, Chinese prisoners also demanded immediate release²⁸.

The third stage requires a more detailed examination as the most politically complex and arguably the most ambiguous stage in terms of its consequences for all the parties to the conflict. In the course of “Little Switch” and “Big Switch”, those due to be exchanged had previously consented to repatriation. In contrast to the third stage, this exchange did not involve any awareness-raising effort concerning POWs’ intentions to repatriate. After the armistice agreement was signed, those who refused immediate repatriation were transferred under the jurisdiction of the Neutral Commission for the Repatriation of Prisoners of War (NC), made up of representatives of “neutral countries” — Czechoslovakia, Poland, Switzerland, and Sweden. As is evident from the list of the member countries, the commission was split along ideological fault lines into two opposing blocs. Its stated objective was to organize, within a period of 90 days, awareness-raising activities among those prisoners of war who refused immediate repatriation following the conclusion of the armistice agreement. When the Neutral Commission was operational, the prisoners were under the guard of Indian troops.

The Commission commenced to taking custody of such prisoners on 10 October 1953, initially holding them in temporary camps in the neutral zone. By 23–24 October 1953, the UN command had transferred a total of 22,604 prisoners of war to its custody, while the KPA and Chinese People’s Volunteers command had transferred only 359 prisoners of war²⁹. Representatives of both commands were to conduct explanatory work with the POWs. The initiative was aimed at persuading as many prisoners of war as possible to return home. The Chinese-North Korean side expressed optimism that, given their previous concessions in the peace talks and their agreement to the principle of voluntary repatriation, they would be given a fair chance to repatriate scores of its prisoners of war through these channels. However, it was soon apparent that this work would not proceed smoothly due to various obstacles that, according to North Korean

²⁸ Donga Ilbo, 23.06.1953.

²⁹ SARF. P4459-27-15510. P. 107.

representatives, were being put up by the American side. In fact, they were referring to a network of agents in the southern camp³⁰, preventing the POWs from attending awareness-raising sessions³¹.

Consequently, Chinese and North Korean representatives were able to use only a small fraction of the time allotted for explanatory work. According to their estimates, they managed to hold their sessions only on 10 out of 90 days, which resulted in “85% of prisoners of war being deprived of the right to attend³².” On 20 January 1954, Indian security forces commenced to transferring the first batch of anti-communist prisoners under the UN command. Altogether, they transferred 21,805 prisoners in the first batch³³. On 23 January, the UN Command released all of them and granted them civilian status. According to *France-Presse*³⁴, the released Chinese POWs were carrying portraits of Chiang Kai-shek and Sun Yat-sen. The North Korean side made a concerted effort to persuade the prisoners to return home. Throughout the night before their release, a warning was being aired via loudspeakers in the DMZ, saying, “This is your final opportunity to see your parents and loved ones. If this opportunity is missed, you will have to struggle to get back³⁵.” The chief of staff of Indian troops in Korea, Brigadier General Gurbaksh Singh, recalled that the loudspeakers installed on the northern side of the DMZ kept them awake all night³⁶.

On 26 January 1954, a press conference was held in Panmunjeom, attended by 21 Americans who had refused repatriation. They cited “McCarthyism with its repression, lynching, and racial discrimination” in the United States as the official reason for their refusal to return home. Their representative issued a statement to this effect, “We are not communists, although some of us aspire to join the communist movement.” Here (In North Korea — author), we have gained significant revelations. We have witnessed remarkable accomplishments that can be achieved when individuals commit to working for the greater

³⁰ This is how the NC reports refer to the camp in the neutral zone where UN prisoners of war were temporarily held in 1953–1954.

³¹ The NC report refers to the existence of POW organizations, responsible for the killings of prisoners of war in the southern camp (In the neutral zone), that housed Chinese and North Korean POWs. The NC came to these conclusions based on the findings of a military tribunal convened by the commander of the Indian guard forces following the murder in October 1953 of the Chinese prisoner of war Zhang Zilong. These organizations prevented prisoners of war from attending educational sessions conducted by representatives of the China-North Korean command. SARF. R4459-27-15510. Pp. 85–96.

³² Ibid. P. 4.

³³ SARF. P4459-27-15510. P. 72.

³⁴ SARF. P4459-27-15509. P. 199.

³⁵ Ibid. P. 210.

³⁶ Ibid.

good rather than personal gain³⁷.” On 28 January 1954, 347 prisoners of war, including 21 Americans, a British national and 325 Koreans, were repatriated from the camps in the neutral zone to North Korea³⁸.

Army Corporal Edwards S. Dickenson and Private Claude Bachelor were among the few Americans and British who refused repatriation after the armistice agreement was signed. However, they subsequently changed their minds and requested repatriation to the United States. On 22 January 1954, Corporal Dickenson was arrested at a US military hospital in Washington, D.C., where he had been admitted for medical examination. He was accused of collaborating with prison authorities and divulging information about his fellow prisoners of war.³⁹

The fate of Dickenson, a 23-year-old American who spent two and a half years as a prisoner of war in North Korea, ultimately came to a sad conclusion in his homeland. He was dismissed from the army and sentenced to 10 years of hard labour. During the interrogation, Dickenson may have been hoping for a reduction in his sentence, which possibly was behind his decision to testify against Bachelor. At the same time, other former POWs who had returned to the US testified against Dickenson. This also applies to Bachelor, a 22-year-old American who spent 38 months in North Korean camps as a POW. During the trial, his defense team argued that Bachelor had been “brainwashed” in Camp No. 5 in Byeokdong, where he was convinced that by cooperating with the communists, he was acting in the interests of the United States. Fifteen former prisoners of war were giving testimonies in Bachelor’s trial. One of them reported, citing another former prisoner, that Bachelor intended to establish a communist group upon his return to the United States called “former prisoners of war for peace” (apparently from among those who participated in the activities of the American and British Prisoners of War Peace Organization). Following a thorough and impartial investigation, Bachelor was found guilty as charged, dismissed from the army and sentenced to life imprisonment. Subsequently, the Military Commission of Texas, Bachelor’s home state, reviewed his case and reduced his sentence to 20 years of hard labour [11. P. 1102].

Some of these 21 “non-repatriates” subsequently returned to the United States. Otho Bell, Lewis Griggs and William Cowart returned from China in September 1955. Clarence Adams returned on the eve of the Cultural Revolution in 1965, and Morris Wills returned more than 10 years later.

³⁷ SARF. P4459-27-15509. P. 278.

³⁸ Ibid. P. 294.

³⁹ SARF. P4459-27-15510. P. 38.

However small was the number of American “non-repatriates”, their very existence, coupled with information on the behaviour of American military personnel in North Korean captivity, gave rise to public discussions on “moral weakness of American military personnel” years later [6. P. 4–5]. Thanks to mass media effort, Americans became aware of the fact that American POWs had participated in radio broadcasts that glorified communism and condemned capitalism. They had also signed “appeals for peace” and written articles accusing the US of instigating the Korean War. This raised significant concern among Americans, seriously affected by anti-communist propaganda. In 1955 in the US, author Virginia Paisley published a book “21 Stayed”, where she told the story of each “non-repatriate” based on the memories of their relatives, friends, and teachers. The book sought to understand why these American citizens chose not to return to their homeland⁴⁰.

In Search for Those “Brainwashed” among UK and US Prisoners of War

The US and British governments were aware that active propaganda was being carried out in prisoner-of-war camps in North Korea. Therefore, there was a great deal of concern with regard to the scores of POWs who had fallen under the sway of communist propaganda. As a result, former American and British prisoners of war were required to undergo thorough questioning upon their return home. In 1953, an MI-5 investigation in the UK revealed that “British officers and senior sergeants (who constituted approximately 12% of British POWs) remained uninfluenced by communist propaganda. Two-thirds of junior non-commissioned officers and privates were also unaffected. Some of the others were indoctrinated to the point that MI-5 classified them as communist sympathizers. Approximately 40 British soldiers returned from Korea staunch supporters of communism”⁴¹. Two years later, in April 1955, the British Parliament held hearings on the POWs treatment in North Korean camps. The discussion was prompted by the British Ministry of Defense publication on 27 February of a leaflet entitled “Treatment of British Prisoners of War in Korea” that reported facts of intense ideological brainwash of British servicemen in Korean captivity. This raised significant concern regarding the proportion of former British prisoners of war who had returned to their

⁴⁰ Pasley V. *21 Stayed*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy; 1955.

⁴¹ Felton M. *War Zone — POW Camp, Korea 1952*. 15 August, 2012. Military History Matters. URL: <https://www.military-history.org/feature/war-zone-pow-camp-korea-1952.htm> (retrieved on: 15.10.2025).

motherland as secret supporters of communism. Evidently, neither Ministry of Defense nor intelligence services were able to provide the answer⁴².

The United States established special panels called the Joint Intelligence Processing Boards (JIBP) to monitor former American POWs upon their release in 1953. The panels included military psychiatrists, psychologists, and intelligence officers. They questioned former prisoners of war on ships travelling to the US from Busan for hours on end, trying to identify signs of “communist brainwash” and treason. Irv Langell recalls that “we were interrogated every day for eight hours. Nobody was concerned about our health, I can damn well guarantee you” [11. P. 1104]. The interrogation transcripts were subsequently used by military investigators to determine who should be tried by a military tribunal and who — by a civilian court. Following a comprehensive review of the interrogation data by the Departments of Defense and Justice, the FBI has formally charged 192 American Korean War veterans with serious felonies. However, the story of former US prisoners of war did not end there. For many years, they and their families remained under FBI surveillance. The FBI questioned their “political reliability” and could summon them at any moment for further interrogation. Persistent suspicion among government agencies and American society towards those who had been in communist North Korea made former POWs prefer to keep silence on their military experience [11. P. 1105].

Interesting results with regard to moral standing of American POWs in North Korean or Chinese camps were obtained in a study conducted on the basis of interrogations of 579 former prisoners of war by J. Segal and a group of researchers at The George Washington University. They analyzed data for the Department of Defense and concluded: 1) “overall 70% of returned prisoners had “contributed actively”, whether “wittingly or unwittingly, to the Communists’ psychological warfare efforts.””; 2) “At least one in ten of them had actively informed on a fellow prisoner at least once”; 3) “Over a third showed no concern or compassion for their fellows”; 4) “Approximately half the men had never encouraged anyone to resist” [11. P. 1104]. As the study demonstrates, military spirit and morals of American POWs were not as strong as they could be.

On October 26, 1957, the *New Yorker* magazine published an article by journalist Eugene Kinkead, who raised alarm over large-scale collaboration of American prisoners of war with the enemy during the Korean War. He described it as an unprecedented phenomenon in American history, indicative of a decline in moral standards among the younger generation. The article was a prologue to his

⁴² British Prisoners of War, Korea (treatment). HC Deb, 07 April 1955. URL: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1955/apr/07/british-prisoners-of-war-korea-treatment> (retrieved on: 15.10.2025).

two monographs “In Every War but One” (American edition, 1959) and “Why They Collaborated” (British edition, 1960), which combined the results of research by the US and British Ministries of Defense on the collaboration of American and British prisoners of war in North Korea⁴³.

E. Kinkead’s opinion was in alignment with that of military psychoneurologist Major W. Meyer, who conducted interviews with numerous former American POWs. Mayer believed that American servicemen in Korea were “passive, narrow-minded, and belonged to a generation that lacked such enduring American virtues as loyalty and patriotism” [11. P. 1103]. For those who agreed with this opinion, especially those from conservative (Republican) backgrounds, it was no surprise that Americans easily ceded to communist propaganda in North Korean captivity. High mortality rates among American prisoners of war during the Korean War and lack of successful escape stories were also explained by their moral weakness. Conversely, an official report of the Advisory Council on Prisoners of War of the US Department of Defense (1955) offered a more nuanced perspective on the conduct of American servicemen in North Korean camps, although it did state that “the Korean story must never be repeated” [12. P. 4]. There were also other government reports with moderate assessments of the behaviour of former prisoners of war. However, since these reports were not available to people, public opinion was mainly shaped by those who could convey their position to the mass reader (Kinkead, Mayer, and others).

In December 1957, an article by I. Faber, H. Harlow, and L.J. West in the US journal “Sociometry” looked at US POWs behaviour in North Korean camps from the psychological perspective. The article was based on a report compiled for the US Air Force Personnel Training Research Center (1956). It was generally aimed at refuting a popular belief that prevailed in American society that Korean communists had brainwashed American soldiers to the extent that they were cooperating en masse with their captors without much resistance. The authors describe the behaviour of US POWs as a manifestation of DDD syndrome (debility, dependency, and dread). Those affected exhibit impaired associative thinking, simplified language and cognitive difficulties, which affects reasoning and decision-making. Impaired thinking can increase susceptibility to arbitrary and harsh training, leading to relatively automatic and uncritical imitative response. This susceptibility can be further enhanced by anxiety and emotional reactions [13. P. 275]. Patriotic and courageous behaviour is contingent on a specific combination of signals and symbols. From this perspective, the reactions exhibited

⁴³ Kinkead E. *Why They Collaborated*. London: Lowe & Brydone Limited; 1960.

by individuals affected by DDD syndrome are not uncommon. “Instead, the usual patterns are not manifested, since the corresponding signals are not there.”

Faber et al. also observe that former prisoners of war tend to have impaired recollections of their time as captives. This phenomenon can be attributed to the same syndrome, characterized by insufficient stimulation, impaired reactions, reduced symbolic activity, and disorganization of the temporal span. This results in reduced clarity and intensity of initial impressions, thereby affecting the ability to recall them. In conclusion, the authors make three assumptions based on the study of emotional and physical state of an individual with DDD syndrome. Firstly, it was determined that the communists did not employ any specific manipulative techniques, such as brainwashing, that would diminish the resistance of prisoners of war in the camps. Secondly, if a person with this syndrome survives in a camp, it is unlikely that they will be able to resist indefinitely. Thirdly, if DDD syndrome reaches an extreme degree, then to a certain extent an agreement with the captor “can be regarded as a natural consequence of the usual principles of human behaviour [13. P. 282].”

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, works were still published in the US, whose authors did not share popular belief that US POWs behaved disgracefully in North Korean camps^{44,45}. For instance, H. Wubben sought to ascertain whether the behaviour of American prisoners of war during the Korean War differed in any way from that in other wars, and to what extent the criticism of their “moral decline” was justified. Following a thorough examination of available sources and materials, the researcher concluded that the behaviour of American prisoners of war in Korean camps did not significantly differ from what was observed in German and Japanese camps during World War II. In other words, US POWs behaviour in Korean camps was consistent with their conduct during World War II, when conditions for prisoners were most challenging. Wubben quotes Morris Wills, one of 21 Americans who refused repatriation in January 1954 but eventually returned home more than 10 years later. Wills, as an eyewitness, documented the behaviour of prisoners of war. “You really can’t worry about the other fellow; you are at the line of existence yourself. If you go under that, you die. You would help each other if you could. Most would try; I wouldn’t say all” [12. P. 11]. A distinctive feature of the Korean War was the attitude of Americans towards veterans whose behaviour allegedly fell short of the ideal. “For the first time the public seemed to assume that such selfish undisciplined behavior as existed

⁴⁴ Rees D. *Korea. The Limited War*. New York: St Martin's Press; 1964.

⁴⁵ Biderman D. *A March to Calumny. The story of American POWs in the Korean War*. New York, London: The MacMillan company; 1963.

among POWs was something new in American military experience and that it was a direct consequence of a characterological deterioration in the nation itself” [12. P. 19].

Conclusion

The division of prisoners of war into “communists” and “anti-communists” runs like a fault line through the entire history of the Korean War. Individuals categorized as belonging to one group or another may not have been fully convinced communists or anti-communists, but due to prevailing circumstances, they were labelled accordingly. The voluntary repatriation approach proposed by the Americans served only to exacerbate the ideological divide between the camps. Each group sought to attract as many prisoners of war as possible to its side, using various methods: education programs, blackmail, and threats. Conflicts between “communists” and “anti-communists” in UN camps were a frequent occurrence, often resulting in the death of prisoners. In Chinese and North Korean internment camps, American and British prisoners of war were made to undergo an “awareness-raising” program of designed to instill a lasting belief in the wrong of the US government and other states that had interfered in Korea’s internal affairs. Following their release, these prisoners of war became the subject of suspicion for intelligence services and civil society of their own countries. In other words, tens of thousands of prisoners of war were subjected to ideological propaganda and manipulation by the US, the commanding forces of the UN, and the DPRK and PRC. Ideological confrontation between the parties was thus one of the important factors that determined the conditions of the prisoners of war in the camps and, in general, their future fate.

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