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Introduction

War and Humanity

IT WAS OCTOBER 1, 1950, and twenty-year-old Oh Se-hŭi was making his way back to his home in Kyŏngsang Province, after multiple stints with the northern Korean People's Army (KPA). After General MacArthur's successful landing at the port of Inchon two weeks earlier on September 15, the KPA had been in steady retreat, and Oh had seized on a chance to return home. Oh stepped out of the wooded hills onto a road that wound around a cabbage field and began to walk north.

A voice barked out from behind him—"Hands in the air!" Oh raised his hands slowly in the air. He had already deemed it inevitable that he would eventually run into a soldier of the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA), the United Nations Command (UNC), or even the KPA again—and in preparation for such encounters he had stashed away four different pieces of paper in strategic places on his body. The first, a handwritten "patriot certificate" attesting to his true dedication to the KPA, he had folded carefully and placed into the lining of his beret-like hat, one worn often by guerilla fighters. The second, a leaflet dropped by UN reconnaissance planes, guaranteed his safe surrender, and he had placed it, like "precious cargo," in the inside pocket of his coat. The third, tucked away in the right back pocket of his pants, was his student papers stating that he was enrolled at Seoul University, the prominent, national university of South Korea. In the left back pocket of his pants the fourth piece of paper—a slim notebook—contained the registered names of his students when he had been a middle school teacher in the countryside. He had rehearsed over and over in his mind what he would

do when he met a member from the KPA, or a US soldier, a guerilla fighter, or an ROKA soldier. The certificate would hold him in good stead with the KPA and the communist guerilla fighters; the UN surrender leaflet appeared to have the most wide-ranging application since the military forces of sixteen different nations, including the Republic of Korea (ROK), were operating on the Korean peninsula under the auspices of the UNC, led by the US military; the student and teacher papers attested to his civilian status and ROK citizenship, possible necessary evidence for someone of the ROKA.

Car brakes screeched to a halt. An ROKA soldier stepped out of the jeep, pointing his rifle at Oh. “What are you?” barked the soldier. Taking out the “precious cargo” of the UN leaflet from his jacket, Oh gave the leaflet to the ROKA soldier, who promptly scoffed at him, declaring, “This doesn’t mean anything here,” ripping up the paper. Oh then gave him his student paper, and the soldier yelled out, while ripping up the paper, “What the hell is a college student doing here?” Not knowing if he would live or die, he then offered the teacher papers to the soldier. “What’s a teacher doing here?” the soldier asked, and he tossed aside the papers. Impatient, the soldier pointed his rifle at Oh’s chest and commanded, “Take off your hat!” Nervously, Oh removed his hat, praying that the Communist certificate would not fall out. It did not. The ROKA soldier examined Oh’s hair, which had grown quite long and unruly during the past few weeks, unlike the short, cropped hair of the guerilla fighters. Satisfied that Oh was not an enemy, the soldier finally called out to the others in the jeep: “Someone come take care of this!” “This” was Oh Se-hŭi—he had now become a prisoner of war.¹

The Script of War

War, we assume, is a part of the universal human condition. And when war converges with another age-old human impulse—storytelling—war emerges from the story more akin to a force of nature than a mere man-made event. The horror, the violence, and the rapture of war distill into allegories and meditations on the nature of humankind. To tell a story about war is to tell a story about humanity.

But if we unclasp war from humanity, our assumption that the sheer human drama of war echoes timeless truths about humanity falls to the side, and we can see more clearly that stories of war hold allegorical power because at their most fundamental, they are stories about intimate encounter. It is the small, rather than the epic, that moves the story of war forward. These stories pivot around critical moments where life and death hang in the balance depending on one person's intimate recognition of another person's humanity. In front of the barrel of a gun, a person begging for food, the indiscriminate bombing of villages—every action hinges on imagining the partial or full humanity of the other. And as Oh Se-hŭi's four pieces of paper make evident, the material with which one vies for recognition is utterly specific and inescapably historical.

In the mid-twentieth century, it was precisely this decisive pause before a person committed an act of violence or mercy in war that became the focus of intense international debate. This moment of recognition was the very social encounter that international organizations, nation-states, and revolutionary groups wanted to institutionalize, to render into a formal process. The aftermath of the devastation from the world wars pushed the question of how to define and regulate warfare, while the surge in anticolonial movements across the globe pushed the question of how to define the limits of humanity. To rewrite the script of legitimate warfare was to re-create the template for the legitimate human subject for a post-1945 global order. Who was worthy of life?

The stories of war and humanity intersected at this historical moment not by virtue of their universal nature, but because of a specific institution that was the central concern of the postwar international world: the nation-state. In the conferences at Geneva or Washington, DC, the stories about war and humanity revealed themselves to be scripts for state action. To regulate war, one had to control state behavior—and to protect the individual human, one had to control state behavior. With the founding of the United Nations in October 1945, the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and the drafting of the Geneva Conventions in 1949, the “family of nations” was the central underpinning system facilitating these definitions of war and

humanity. In turn, it was the basic element of sovereign recognition that bound and held this system together.

However, people in the colonies demanding liberation and autonomous statehood all around the globe issued a fundamental challenge to this system of sovereign recognition. Whether India, Indochina, or Algeria, the demands for sovereign recognition shook the very foundation of Western colonial power and thus its global reach: its prerogative to deny recognition, whether in terms of humanity or the waging of violence. War, we must remember, was a privilege accorded only to recognized states. Only sovereign entities could engage in what Carl von Clausewitz had conceptualized as a “duel,” a legitimate extension of policy making involving two recognizable sides. Violence within the colonies received other monikers—insurgency, riot, rebellion, among others.

The official outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950, revealed an undeniably curious situation between the naming of violence and the taming of violence on the world stage. As Western powers refined and redefined the “laws of war,” it began to appear that states were no longer waging “war” anymore. When asked by the press whether or not the United States was at war on the Korean peninsula, President Harry Truman replied succinctly, “We are not at war.” He agreed with a later characterization of the military mobilization offered by a member of the press: a “police action under the United Nations.”² The vocabulary to frame military action quickly multiplied: *police action*, *intervention*, *occupation*.

The script of war was changing. Two imperatives that shaped the post-1945 world were in explicit tension. The first imperative was colonial power. Western powers faced an unanticipated quandary: to wage “war” with another entity implied political recognition of its sovereign legitimacy, an act that they desired to defer as long as possible in face of anticolonial movements. The second imperative was moral authority. The criminalization of “aggressive” war shifted the legitimate grounds on which a state could declare and mobilize war. It was no longer sufficient to declare war in the patent interests of the state. Now, war would have to be conducted in the name of “humanity,” framed in the terms

of a universal conflict rather than a state-specific necessity. War could now only be conducted as a disavowal of war itself.

This book tells a story of the changing script of warfare in the mid-twentieth century through the war that was not a war—the Korean War. At stake in this conflict was not simply the usual question of territorial sovereignty and the nation-state. The heart of the struggles revolved around the question of political recognition, the key relational dynamic that formed the foundation for the post-1945 nation-state system. This book argues that if we want to understand how the act of recognition became the essential terrain of war, we must step away from the traditional landscape of warfare—the battlefield—and into the interrogation room.

The mandate for war exceeded sovereign territorial borders and delved into the most intimate corner of humanity—the individual human subject. The geography of war was no longer limited to a traditional sense of sovereignty in the state-territorial sense. Rather, the locus of war in the “new” postwar era was the interior worlds of individual people. Whether American psychologists in the US military or Communist revolutionaries on the Korean peninsula, people in the postwar world focused their attention on the interior human world, as both empires and revolutions claimed the central project of decolonization. To quote Frantz Fanon, “Decolonization is truly the creation of new men.”³ The ambitions of empire, revolution, and international solidarity converged on an intimate meeting of military warfare: the interrogator and the interrogated prisoner of war. Who would fashion the new human subject for the world after 1945? It was a vast, impossible question, but one that had immediate, urgent consequences on the ground as the forms of violence multiplied as quickly as the language for war fragmented. In the middle between the tides of violence and the unreliability of language were people—whether Korean, American, “Oriental,” Chinese, Communist, or anti-Communist. What unfolds in the pages that follow is a history of a war over humanity on the ground, following two generations of people from both sides of the Pacific as they created and negotiated interrogation rooms from World War II through the Korean War and into the McCarthy era.

The Korean War on the Stage of History

It is no small irony of history that the most identifiable marker of the Korean peninsula to people outside of Korea is an abstract line that cuts across the peninsula on most maps of Korea. The 38th parallel, first drawn by two US officials late at night on August 14, 1945, as the proposed line of division between the US and Soviet military occupations on the Korean peninsula, had no correlation to any geographical or cultural boundary on the ground.⁴ On the ground, in the years after 1945, Koreans, Soviets, and Americans were all uncertain about exactly where the 38th parallel was, and smugglers and refugees followed multiple trails northward and southward. After June 25, 1950, the 38th parallel had gone from being a temporary, even arbitrary, border to being a sacred sovereign border in this story of the war. On June 26, 1950, when President Harry Truman delivered a statement explaining his decision to mobilize US troops on the Korean peninsula, he focused on the 38th parallel, lambasting the southward crossing of the northern Korean People's Army on June 25, 1950, as "an act of aggression" and a "[threat] to the peace of the world."⁵ Responding to Truman's statement with their own press release, Soviet officials accused the "South Korean puppet government" of provoking the June 25 attack over the 38th parallel, which in turn was clear evidence of the US "imperialist warmongers."⁶ According to these accusations, the 38th parallel functioned as a line of sovereignty drawn on the Korean peninsula and as a symbol of the borders of the emerging global order.

From the vantage point of the White House, the Korean War was a front line in the larger "Cold War" conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, where the 38th parallel enabled Truman to tell the story of the conflict on the Korean peninsula according to a familiar script of war, one where the violation of a sovereign border provided the impetus and reason for entrance into a war. The standard story of the Korean War closely hews to the 38th parallel as its major pivot. The northern Korea People's Army (KPA) moved swiftly down the peninsula after June 1950, and the KPA troops and personnel also quickly instituted planned programs of land reform, as well as claiming Demo-

cratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) sovereignty over the southern half of the peninsula. From his command post in US-occupied Japan, General Douglas MacArthur orchestrated the landing at the port city of Inchon on the western coast of the Korean peninsula in mid-September, which turned the military tides for the United States and the United Nations from surprising defeat to possible success. In late September 1950, General MacArthur requested and received permission from President Harry Truman for the US-led United Nations Command (UNC) forces to cross over the 38th parallel and continue northward. Truman gave him the green light, and the UNC forces proceeded across the 38th parallel. The war of Cold War containment had become a war of rollback.

This “police action” soon changed again. In November 1950, the People's Volunteer Army of the People's Republic of China entered the war, crossing the Yalu River from China into North Korea. Once again, the military tides turned, and the United States and UN forces found themselves pushed back against the 38th parallel. By July 1951, the 38th parallel became the agreed-on site for cease-fire negotiations between the United Nations Command, the People's Republic of China, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In the early 1950s, politicians and diplomats could barely sustain the usual trope of a violated border as a meaningful reason for the violence sanctioned and continuing on the Korean peninsula. That is, the traditional script of warfare requiring the transgression of a sovereign, territorial border was no longer sufficient for what was actually at stake in the conflict. Thus, while the Korean War began in June 1950 as a war waged over the violation of a border—the 38th parallel, by early 1952, it was becoming a war waged over the violation of a human subject—the prisoner of war.

Through the history of the Korean War, we can acutely see the story of how, in the middle of the twentieth century, official warfare moved from being waged over geopolitical territory to being waged over human interiority. This shift had happened in plain sight on the 38th parallel, where the armistice negotiations were taking place in a small village called Panmunjom. On January 2, 1952, the US delegate representing the United Nations Command placed a new proposal on the negotiating

table—voluntary POW repatriation. Immediately, the Chinese and North Korean delegates pointed out that the 1949 Geneva Conventions on the Treatment of Prisoners of War stipulated *mandatory* repatriation at the end of the war, and they refused the proposal.

According to the US-proposed plan, at the end of the conflict, a soldier would be able to “exercise his individual option as to whether he will return to his own side or join the other side.” In his argument, Admiral Ruthven Libby, the US delegate, used phrases such as “principle of freedom of choice” and “the right of individual self-determination.”⁷ Or in other words Libby put forth—the voluntary repatriation proposal was essentially “a bill of rights” for the prisoner of war. “As regards repatriation, it permits freedom of choice on the part of the individual, thus insuring that there will be no forced repatriation against the will of an individual.” In Libby’s choice of words, we can see how the prisoner of war, previously a bureaucratic category of wartime personhood, had become a political subject. The once-vulnerable subject of war, who required the protection and regulation of states, now was a political subject, one invested with desires and the capacity for choice-making. American-style liberalism had come to the interrogation room, and in such a space, the prisoner of war could supposedly express his or her desire, and therefore exercise a freedom to choose.

Historians of the Korean War have often dismissed the POW repatriation controversy as a propaganda ploy used by all sides to gain the upper hand in the armistice negotiations, relegating the story to the footnotes. However, the controversy over POW repatriation became so heated that the signing of the cease-fire was effectively delayed for eighteen months, while the fighting continued across the Korean peninsula. The duration and scope of the debate were unexpected. The United States created a stark binary between “voluntary” repatriation versus “forced” repatriation at the negotiation tables. On closer examination, we can see that the United States was, in fact, making a stunning assertion. The United States was claiming that the most opaque and most coercive space of warfare—the interrogation room—could be transformed by the United States into a liberal, bureaucratic space.

The US delegate at Panmunjom and the Truman administration insisted on the seemingly self-evident transparent nature of their screening process; the US military interrogation room would be a space where Korean and Chinese prisoners of war would be free to express individual choice regarding whether or not they would return to their “homeland.” A simple “yes” or “no” was to be recorded by the interrogator. The interrogation room, rather than being a peripheral, invisible space, suddenly became the public, explicit site of the workings of US liberal power. The conduct of warfare—and not the elimination of war—was evidence on the global stage of history, a demonstration of one’s capacity for governance.

But the choice offered to the Korean prisoner of war was not a simple matter of a “yes” or “no.” The Korean prisoners of war understood that the deceptively straightforward question of repatriation was, in fact, another form of the “What are you?” question asked by the ROKA soldier to Oh Se-hui on the path by the cabbage field in October 1950. Were they anti-Communists or Communists? Were they pro-American or anti-American? The presence of two states on the Korean peninsula, one created under Soviet military occupation, the other under US military occupation after liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, literally created a competition between which type of putative “decolonization” was valid, effective, and democratic. After the 1948 elections in the south, the United States and the United Nations declared the southern Republic of Korea the only sovereign state on the peninsula. For the United States, to have prisoners of war choose to *not* repatriate to the northern Democratic People’s Republic of Korea would be to validate the US project of liberation through military occupation in the south. For the Korean prisoner of war, it would be another moment of negotiating political recognition for survival.

The supposed moral compass of politics in the war had moved its needle from the 38th parallel to the prisoner of war. And the debate over the nature of the conflict found expression in the controversy around the interrogation room. The issue of POW repatriation captured the attention of the international press and immediately became the flash

point of a global debate involving the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the state governments of India, Mexico, and Brazil. This seemingly one-dimensional issue of POW repatriation was, in fact, a dense node of global politics. When Indian General Kodandera Subayya Thimayya met with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru for last-minute instructions on his mission to create a system for POW repatriation along the 38th parallel in 1953, Nehru offered him the following words: “Your job is to find some solution to the problem that is plaguing the world in Korea. A solution to that problem may mean that similar problems in other parts of Asia can be solved as well. Thus, your job can well mean peace in Asia and perhaps in the world.”⁸ The high political stakes of decolonization had reconfigured the site of the interrogation room, bringing it out of the shadows of exception and into the limelight of diplomatic politics as the US-Soviet Cold War dynamics began to assert its primacy on the international stage.

The nature of the intimate meeting that took place within the interrogation room became a measure of the respective state’s legitimacy in its claims or challenges to ideals of liberal governance in the decolonizing post-1945 world. In the interrogation rooms of the Korean War, the templates for this encounter essentially served as allegorical scripts for idealized processes of decolonization of the individual subject by the state. Which state could reinvent the most intimate relations of the colonizer and the colonized, to transform the relationship between the state and subject into one of liberation, democracy, or freedom?

This book foregrounds the landscape of interrogation during the US occupation of Korea and the Korean War, tracing a matrix of interrogation rooms created by the United States, the southern Republic of Korea, the northern Democratic People’s Republic of Korea alongside the People’s Republic of China, and also India. When we look at the Korean War from the inside of these interrogation rooms, we see a set of stakes not wholly bound to the imperatives of the early Cold War. The figure of the prisoner of war was essentially a distillation of the relationship between the state and its subject. A soldier was ideally the manifestation of two core elements legitimating the state’s

mobilization of warfare. The soldier was both a citizen and a weapon of the state. The soldier's participation was, on one hand, proof of the national public's consent for the war. At the same time, the soldier's performance in the war was supposed to be evidence of the state's superior technologies of warfare. In the Korean War, states challenged the legitimacy of other states via the POW issue. To have the POW renounce his or her state would shake the legitimacy of that state's governance, and to criticize the state's exploitation of its own soldiers would undermine the superiority of the enemy state's conduct of warfare.

The POW controversy of the Korean War touched off a constellation of political anxieties and ambitions because it resonated with a very basic question confronting the decolonizing world. In the post-1945 crucible of mass militarization of US total warfare, the retreat of Japanese imperialism, and broad anticolonial movements across Asia, the question arose about how to configure a relationship between a state and its subject that could serve as the viable basis for a kind of national or international governance in the post-1945 world. In other words, how did one configure a person for state-building, revolution, or imperial warfare? And who would then be the agent in history that would usher in a new era of a decolonized future?

Enter the interrogation room of the Korean War at this crossroads of empire and revolution. Different states and militaries were claiming that they were able to mitigate the human impulse of fear, violence, and power in the interrogation room. The idealized interrogation room exposed the assumptions held by those who had configured the encounter regarding what legitimate governance looked like. Whether it was American ideas of liberal governance and its demand for a transparent subject desiring free market choice, or Korean Communist philosophies about individual revolutionary subjectivity for collective self-determination, or Indian notions of nonalignment to position the postcolonial Asian as already holding the potential to be the ideal national citizen—all of these questions about the individual's place on the global historical stage of postcolonial nation-building were in play

within the interrogation rooms throughout the Korean peninsula. The interrogation room, in this story of the Korean War, was not only supposed to produce information, but also subjects.

The Interrogation Room in the Landscape of War

We often think of the interrogation room as hidden, invisible, and separate from the lives of ordinary people. In fact, a rather specific image might come to mind for many of us: a cloistered darkened room somewhere that serves as a site for extraordinary human drama, whether in terms of physical violence or intellectual wits. The interrogation room is a symbol of the cloaked underbelly of the social order, the exceptional periphery that enables the maintenance of everyday norms. In the following pages, the interrogation rooms that appear are more ordinary and idiosyncratic. Interrogation can look like the meeting between Oh Se-hŭi and the ROKA soldier; it can be a hastily arranged group interrogation for surrendered POWs after a battle; it can be questioning at a checkpoint for refugees; and it can be even a highly formal and ritualized interrogation in the explanation rooms organized by the Indian-led Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) at the 38th parallel. With such variation and improvisation, “interrogation”—as practiced and negotiated by those on the ground—was a landscape rather than a contained space. And once we are able to see more adequately how interrogation was embedded—sometimes even in plain sight—into the everyday, we are also able to comprehend how the encounter mediated between the interrogator and the prisoner of war was only one node of a complex ecosystem of violence, intimacy, and bureaucracy.

This book explores how the individual person became the terrain for warfare and also its *jus ad bellum* in the mid-twentieth century during the postcolonial war that was officially not a war. And I argue that it was the interrogator who became critical to fashioning the POW for these dual purposes. In the calculus of modern warfare, the very existence of a prisoner of war was supposed to be proof of the humanity—the benevolence, the compassion, and the rational morality—of the

capturing soldier, the military, and the state. Which side treated the prisoners of war more humanely? Under whose custody was the POW population larger? The POW was a constant demonstration of the state's mercy and ability to transcend the evils of war. From the standpoint of the interrogation room, the discussion around the POW during the Korean War belied the deeper stakes at hand in the controversy. This controversy was not a discussion about the humanity of the prisoner of war. Instead, this controversy revolved around who had the capacity to recognize another's humanity. For the United States, interrogators needed to provide the POW as justification for war.

Parallel to how the Korean War was the war that was not a war, the United States was the aspiring empire that had no imperial ambitions. In the wake of World War II, the United States insisted that it would be the harbinger of an era different from the colonialism of the British or the French. In October 27, 1945, Truman declared in a speech, "We seek no territorial expansion of selfish advantage. . . . We believe in the eventual return of sovereign and self-government to all peoples who have been deprived of them by force."⁹ On March 12, 1947, Truman addressed Congress in a bid for the United States to give aid to Turkey and Greece, and his speech encapsulated certain tenets of what is now considered to be the Truman Doctrine on US foreign policy. Notably, Truman gave two statements that characterized the projected role of the United States on the post-1945 global stage. The first statement was on the freedom of choice: "At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life." The Cold War storyline of the Soviet Union as representing slavery and the United States representing freedom was the clearest, simplest delineation of US self-presentation as a benevolent power. The second statement highlighted the threat to freedom: "If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world—and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation."¹⁰ The United States was now, according to Truman's narrative, the self-declared guardian of the world. In her work on US war-making, Mimi Nyugen notes how "freedom is precisely the idiom through which liberal empire acts as an arbiter for *all* humanity."¹¹ For the Korean War, it was the figure of the POW that

facilitated this ideological reconfiguring of liberal warfare. And this sociocultural shift went hand in hand with a massive structural shift in American empire-making.

US historians point to the Korean War as a pivotal event for the United States in global Cold War history. The Korean War operated as the catalyst for the mobilization and rise of what we now call the US national security state. In April 1950, the Policy Planning Staff, headed by Paul Nitze, presented to Truman what historians have called the “blueprint” or the “bible of American national security,” the National Security Council Paper 68 (NSC-68).¹² The fifty-eight-page report was an assessment of the state of national security, and at the heart of this report’s narrative was “the conviction that a new era of total war had dawned on the United States,” to use the words of historian Michael Hogan.¹³ NSC-68 proposed a militarized state for a permanent state of war, one that followed the Truman Doctrine of how an attack anywhere in the world could be seen as an attack on the United States. Casting the Soviet Union as an implacable enemy, the writers of NSC-68 effectively called for “a substantial increase” in both military expenditures and military assistance programs as well as the development of “overt” and “covert psychological warfare” programs to “encourage mass defections” or the “fomenting and supporting [of] unrest and revolt.”¹⁴ But for Truman and Congress, the NSC-68 called for an exponential budgetary increase that seemed prohibitive. Then the Korean War broke out. As Dean Acheson and Paul Nitze reflected in 1953 on those early months of 1950, they both agreed: “Korea came along and saved us.”¹⁵

Or as Acheson stated in more detail: “Korea moved a great many things from the realm of theory and brought them right into the realm of actuality and the realm of urgency.”¹⁶ The cost of bringing the NSC-68 proposal into “the realm of actuality” required an estimated \$40 billion, which was three times more than the \$13 billion slotted for 1950 military spending. With the Korean War, the military budget exponentially increased to \$48 billion by May 31, 1951.¹⁷ Korea soon became a focal point for the expansionist strategies of the United States over the globe. In 1953, there were 813 military bases under US command, and President Dwight Eisenhower’s first term would oversee the creation

of sixty-eight more bases.¹⁸ “The war in Korea brought about a radical revision of postwar strategic planning,” note Seungsook Moon and Maria Höhn, and according to their work, “the bulk of the US overseas military empire” was concentrated in South Korea, Japan, Okinawa, and West Germany.¹⁹ This infrastructure and network laid the grounds to facilitate interventionist US operations on a global scale.

But what historian Bruce Cumings has called the “archipelago of empire” was a refashioning of US ambition against the backdrop of decolonization.²⁰ As in the late nineteenth century with the Spanish-American Wars when the United States annexed the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and also Hawai‘i and American Samoa, in the post-1945 era the United States turned to the 130 Pacific Islands as valuable sites for military testing and bases, using tactics such as “leasing instead of annexing territory” from Western colonial powers, which the Department of Defense stated enhanced “our reputation for integrity of international agreement and traditional lack of imperialistic ambition.”²¹ With the military bases, the United States could argue that it had no designs on supposed colonial settlement. This extensive base network undergirded another strategy to extend US military reach over the globe: military assistance agreements and mutual defense treaties.

The interrogation room was a compressed site for the configuring and inventing of the labor, infrastructure, and policy required for this new liberal empire. Under Truman, the United States had installed Military Assistance Aid Groups (MAAGs) in the Philippines, Korea, and Taiwan, and in 1952 fifteen countries signed defense agreements with the United States. Counterinsurgency and military training were also essential tactics of the United States in the post-1945 era, with entities like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) established in 1947 and charged with conducting “covert operations ... which are so planned and executed ... that if uncovered the US Government can plausibly disclaim any responsibility for them.”²² The military bases, the covert operations, and the POW controversy in the Korean War—all of these framed an empire that disavowed its imperial nature and its colonial past and present.

Mapping out the experiences in the interrogation room lays bare the projects of militarized surveillance in the post-1945 era, and the intricate

interdependencies of the labor involved. Just as people were forced to move through interrogation networks, people also moved and created these flexible networks across territories and the Pacific. Both the interrogator and the prisoner of war became the terrain on which the reinscription of meaning took place at this contested node between empire, revolution, and state-building. The simple, high-stakes question posed to Oh Se-hŭi by the ROKA soldier—"What are you?"—was, in essence, the question every state or organization was demanding of the interrogator and the prisoner.

The US military interrogation room that one meets in this study was neither monolithic nor absolute in its hegemonic project. Nor was it the sole form of interrogation that the Korean or US prisoner of war encountered in the years before, during, and after the three years of the Korean War. The invention of multiple, different types of interrogation serves as the central framing for this study, and I examine how these historically configured interrogation rooms revealed, in turn, multiple visions and interpretations of the project of formal decolonization and its relation to another project—modern warfare. The different visions of either Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Indian President Jawaharlal Nehru, or President Syngman Rhee regarding Korea's significance to the post-1945 global order were contingent on thousands of acts of interrogation, translation, and disciplining of possible subjects. It was interrogation that provided the proper narrative needed, that assured policy makers of the availability of a willing, desirous subject. What follows is not meant to be a comprehensive story of the Korean War as an event, nor is it a comprehensive account of the prisoner of war experience on all sides of the war.²³ Rather, it is a history of how people remade warfare in front of formal decolonization through historically specific sites, technologies, and experiences.

From within the interrogation room, the cast of unexpected historical actors within this story multiplies—Japanese American young men, who had spent their adolescence in the internment camps of World War II, were often the translators for or first-level interrogators of the Korean prisoners of war, the Korean prisoners of war themselves were

from both sides of the 38th parallel or even from the farther reaches of the Korean diaspora, like Uzbekistan or the northern regions of the Soviet Union. Members of the Custodian Force of India had fought under the British colonial military forces during World War II, and some of them had gone on to consolidating the national Indian Forces through the violent Partition of India and Pakistan. The US prisoners of war formed a generational cohort who had grown up through the Great Depression and came to the Korean peninsula with experiences under Jim Crow segregation and the US “warfare state” forged during the mass mobilization of both the home and foreign fronts of World War II.²⁴

Both the interrogator and the prisoner of war understood that war-making was fundamentally also empire- or state-building. Between the mass demobilization of the Japanese imperial army, which had used Korean conscripts and volunteers in its expansionist projects throughout Asia, and the Cold War configuring of the US total warfare state of World War II, states and organizations were eager to mark and claim the labor of these moving populations.²⁵ As for the Chinese and North Korean interrogators, whether through the Chinese revolution of 1949 that brought the Chinese Communist Party into power or the Korean anticolonial guerilla militias in Manchuria during the 1930s, they had participated in the creation of military forces as a claim to legitimate nation-state status.

The vantage point of the interrogation room affords us a different time frame for the beginning and ending of this story of the Korean War. This story of the war positions the significance of the Korean War beyond the usual Cold War binary power struggle, and not solely within the postcolonial civil war binary of the anti-Communist south versus the Communist north. Rather, through the prism of the interrogation room, we can understand the Korean War as part of a longer history of Japanese colonial legacies and US imperial ambitions within a trans-Pacific frame, as both projects converged on the Korean peninsula in the middle of the twentieth century. From the Philippine-American War of the turn of the century, through the Russo-Japanese War, the

Sino-Japanese War, and the Asia-Pacific theater of World War II, both the United States and Japan were reformulating their claims to being the legitimate future horizon of a new kind of global order. A history of the interrogation room critically becomes a study of projects of subject-making, racial formations, and claims to sovereignty in the wake of 1945, as the former colony of Korea, the former empire of Japan, and the self-disavowing empire of the United States navigated how to present themselves as nation-states. It is an international story of how the Korean War heralded an era of what jurist Carl Schmitt had termed “wars over humanity” in 1950, where nation-states no longer made wars, but rather wars made nation-states.²⁶

Violence in the Archive

Paper was also a weapon of war. In September 1950, a month before his capture by the ROKA soldier, Oh Se-hŭi was traveling with his comrades when he heard a plane even before he could see it. Immediately, he rushed for cover. One never knew what to expect from a US airplane. Among the possibilities: napalm or paper. It was either potential death in the form of a jellied gasoline that burned into the skin, or potential safety in the form of a “safe conduct pass”—a leaflet printed in both English and Korean guaranteeing safe surrender to anyone in possession of it. For civilians and soldiers on the ground, the Korean War was one of constant, terrifying bombing, on a scale often lost on the American public. From 1950 to 1953, the United States forces dropped 386,037 bombs and 32,357 tons of napalm. Historian Marilyn Young makes this calculation: “If one counts all types of airborne ordnance, including rockets and machine-gun ammunition, the total tonnage comes to 698,000.”²⁷ Within the three years of continuous active fighting on the Korean peninsula, the US military had dropped more tonnage of bombs than it had in the entire Asia-Pacific theater during World War II. This turn to air war operated hand in hand with the deepening investment in psychological warfare. Both the psyche and the bombing target were useful abstractions for policy makers on which to

demonstrate the power of America to the world. The US military dropped over one billion leaflets over the breadth of the Korean peninsula during the war.²⁸ Psychological warfare was a definite weapon of war, and soldiers like Oh Se-hŭi were its terrain.

The bomb that exploded over Oh Se-hŭi that day in September 1950 was a paper bomb. Oh secretly picked up a “safe conduct pass” leaflet that fell to the ground and stowed it in his inside jacket pocket for possible later use.²⁹ Paper—and what was written on it—was a vital resource and tool. Between the over one billion leaflets bombed over the Korean peninsula by the US military and the UNC safe surrender leaflet ripped up by the ROKA soldier, paper was not a neutral object in warfare.

To tell the story of the prisoner of war during Korean War, we must also pay close attention to the circulation and meaning of paper on this landscape of napalm and ammunition. Paper was not in ready supply because it was, in fact, quite scarce, but the importance of paper was undeniable. When International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegate Frederick Bieri visited the camp on Koje-do, he noted in his report that the POWs requested more copies of the 1949 Geneva Conventions to read and post in their compounds. The POWs also asked for more writing utensils, more Japanese-English dictionaries, and more paper. When thirty Korean Communist prisoners of war managed to capture the US camp commander of UNC Camp #1 on Koje Island in early March 1952, one of their first requests was for one thousand sheets of paper. The prisoners of war wrote essays, petitions, and letters, sending these to President Eisenhower, the United Nations, and the ICRC. Others kept their own writing projects. A twenty-four-year-old POW named Lee Pyong Man, who had been attending college at the outbreak of the war, complained that his “notebook that contained the communist history was confiscated” during a search of his compound.³⁰ Two hundred leaflets had been allegedly picked up by the ROKA soldiers around the POW compounds before a singing demonstration instigated by women Korean Communist POWs at the Koje-do camp.³¹

Much of the prisoners' mobilization of paper in wartime was in response to and engagement with a power structure of warfare and governance that was not located simply in war rooms or military armaments. Oh Se-hŭi's experiences introduce us to a central political concern for our own project of telling the story of the Korean War through the interrogation room: the archive. Beyond the paper used by the prisoner of war was the vast and immense scaffolding of institutional paperwork built around the POW during the Korean War. Indeed, to tell the story of the POW is also to tell the story of this sizable paper archive with its global reach and dense bureaucracy. The idea that bureaucracy was so integral to warfare was not new—but the urgency and necessity in documenting details around the POW does call for our consideration. And tracking the different paper trails following the discussion on prisoners of war leads us through the bureaucracies of multiple states and institutions: the US Army, the Department of State, the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the meetings at Panmunjom, while also following the petitions, letters, and demands of the prisoners of war, all sent to the White House, the United Nations, the ICRC, or different countries. Narratives of the US military in the Korean War have primarily focused on the literal military tactics on the battlefield or the political diplomacy occurring at the highest levels; however, this story of the war is much more interested in the military man as bureaucrat, the interrogator as bureaucrat, and interrogation as a template of bureaucracy.

To create a certain kind of paper archive was to claim a certain kind of legitimacy in international politics. The imperative to produce the documentation needed to support the regulatory effect the ICRC hoped that the Geneva Conventions would have on state warfare merged with another phenomenon. As scholar Karma Nabulsi has noted, the debates over defining war crimes during and after World War II “directly” affected the Geneva negotiations in 1949. Nabulsi singles out the 1942 London Declaration of War Crimes as “one of the most important legal precedents” that undergirded the framing of the Nuremberg Trials of 1946 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.³² The liberal internationalist order was highly invested in notions of evidence

and documentation, and the institutional archive of the POW was created around the express purpose of documenting the treatment of the prisoner of war. On the post-1945 stage of war crimes trials, the question of evidence—and who could judge—had become an encompassing issue. In the Korean War, the POW was the evidence, the measure of a state's conduct in wartime, and states put each other on trial in the court of public opinion. But in front of the sheer volume of records, this book neither takes bureaucratic practices for granted, nor approaches paper as a benign medium. In the following pages, the story of paper and laws of war begins with the letter three Korean emissaries bring from King Kojong to the delegates of the 1907 Hague Convention to protest the Japanese protectorate treaty forced upon Korea and ends with President Dwight Eisenhower signing the Code of Conduct for American troops as Executive Order 10631 in 1955, bringing the colonial era into the same story of the Cold War.

This book tackles the immense paper bureaucracy of the very national security state catalyzed by the Korean War. The policy memoranda, the meeting minutes, military intelligence reports, and correspondence: the US diplomatic and military paper archives housed in the National Archives at College Park, Maryland have provided the foundational grounds on which historical analysis has gained traction in order to analyze US foreign policy. Interrogation generated more paper within this system, as military intelligence provided the “information” for military operations or policy decisions. For a period like the US occupation of southern Korea in the post-1945 era, the reports written and produced by the Counterintelligence Corps and the G2 intelligence sections of the US military have served as the basis for many histories on postliberation southern Korea, and these documents are housed in the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, and not on the Korean peninsula.

The paper archival base for this book extends to files that have never received systematic analytical treatment by scholars. Included in this previously unexamined archive of documents are two important collections: the first is a collection of over three hundred investigation cases containing interrogation transcripts and summaries of incidents

in the UNC POW camp located on Koje Island. The second is a collection that was recently declassified through a long-standing Freedom of Information Act request—it is a collection of US Counterintelligence Corps (CIC) interrogations of over one thousand US prisoners of war returning from Chinese and North Korean POW camps after the cease-fire signing, and the CIC specifically focused on the POWs' experiences of interrogation. Alongside military manuals and lecture transcripts on interrogation training techniques, these archives provide us the opportunity to discern not only the idealized templates for the conduct and product of interrogation but also the improvisation and uncertainty that ran through these report narratives. If “interrogation is an art with as many branches as music, or painting,” as the 1952 guide for new CIC agents counseled, then for the interrogator, “it is his object to produce a coherent, factual, and readable narrative.”³³ What were the standardized narrative templates for “exposing” or “revealing” elements in interrogation, and how can we read them also for how these templates obscured or erased other elements simultaneously?

And sometimes the archive interrupts its own logic. In a high-security, climate-controlled vault at the National Archives in College Park, two large archival boxes sit on a shelf in the company of Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle, Eva Braun's diary, and Mason and Dixon's surveying journal. Rather than housing an iconic object from “American” history, the boxes contain a blood document from a war largely forgotten by mainstream America—a petition covering over a hundred pages written and signed in blood by 487 anti-Communist Korean prisoners of war, members of the Anti-Communist Youth League in the Yŏngch'ŏn POW camp. Meticulously written in Korean and translated into English by the POWs themselves, three sets of petitions, all dated May 10, 1953, were addressed respectively to President Dwight Eisenhower, General Mark Clark, and Lieutenant General William Harrison. This document's residence in the vault, according to one senior archivist, is due to the difficulty in cataloging and preserving the material: how does one categorize and store a blood document? The blood document poses a challenge to the classification system because it forces us to confront language and corporeality at the same time, rupturing basic assumed

divisions between the mind (language/text) and the body (blood). This blood petition raises the simple question of, what does blood do to text, and what does text, in turn, do to blood? The writing medium of blood pushes us to approach the document again as an *act* of writing instead of moving immediately to the textual content itself. What kind of political act was this blood petition?

The focus on writing as an act forces us to consider what is not contained or recorded in the paper archive, especially in the interrogation reports.³⁴ The bureaucratic template for these records erases the conflict and struggle within the interrogation room. Much more complicated questions over translation, physical gestures, the threat of violence—these were moved beyond the frame of the interrogation report. The only archival evidence of the presence and labor of the Japanese American interrogators in the National Archives is in the name noted for the interrogator in the reports. The work of Korean translators or the experiences of Korean prisoners of war in these interrogation rooms is either absent or requires a close, creative reading of the interrogation and investigation reports' narratives. Oral history interviews I conducted with Japanese American former interrogators, Korean former prisoners of war, and also Korean civilians who had lived in the surroundings of the POW camps during the war are central to the framework of the story that follows. These oral history narratives became the basis for focusing on the questions of subject-making vis-à-vis the institutionalization of warfare in this book.

Paper, in the end, was not the most important material in the interrogation room. In practice, the body was the most important text. The very first piece of paper Oh offered to the ROKA soldier was the UN safe surrender leaflet, which the ROKA soldier ripped up rather contemptuously. In the end, none of the paper offered by Oh sufficed. When the soldier saw Oh's long hair, it was in that moment Oh became a person deserving of another moment of life. Both Oh Se-hŭi and the ROKA soldier had their own fluency based on their experiences under Japanese colonial rule and US occupation in how to read the other, how to anticipate the other, and how to negotiate the other's possible readings. The stakes were high regarding how the POWs navigated

and negotiated their role—and violence was not held in abeyance, but rather was a constant presence. Their physical bodies were always a part of the equation, and encounter was not something mediated only by paper.

American prisoners of war found themselves facing the same quandary and challenge. After the signing of the cease-fire agreement in July 1953, the American public and government became fascinated and preoccupied with a group of twenty-one American prisoners of war who chose to stay in China at the end of the war. But their choice of China seemed incomprehensible to mainstream America. Why would this motley group of young American men choose to stay in China? In reply, the American public held on to the notion of “brainwashing.” In other words, these American POWs had essentially *not* made a choice, and were instead victims of an “Oriental” Communist regime through “brainwashing” techniques used in the interrogation rooms. And the stigma along with the suspicion of having been a prisoner of war interrogated in the North Korean and Chinese POW camps followed the American soldiers long after they ceased being officially prisoners of war.

The cultural phenomenon of “brainwashing” introduces an important theme of thinking about the body alongside the paper archive. The hysteria around the US prisoners of war was energized by an anxiety over how to know what had happened to the POW when there was no definitive external physical marker of change or impact from the experience of captivity. The body, in essence, was also considered an archive. The body was an archive of experience, and people were concerned about how to read the body effectively and efficiently. Physical gestures, speech acts, the body itself—all of these became a kind of text to be read, assessed, and evaluated. The US military experimented with lie detector tests on Koreans, with the basic question of whether or not the “Oriental” body registered and recognized the difference between telling a “lie” or the “truth.” Indeed, the kind of body that was key for the US military in developing interrogation techniques was the racialized body. The ability to discern and tell the truth was a question of embod-

ied, biological selfhood. In an era of formal decolonization, this supposedly “objective” measuring of a racialized subject’s capacity for veracity was embedded in the larger political project of assessing of whether or not postcolonial societies had the capacity for self-government. In other words, the struggle over the global geopolitical order that occurred on an intimate scale within the interrogation room was more patently a conflict over the racial order.³⁵

American POWs themselves understood that ideas about racial orders were fundamentally at stake in the interrogation rooms. In the North Korean and Chinese-run POW camps along the Yalu River, American POWs recreated the Ku Klux Klan. The anxiety that people, states, and societies held around wartime interrogation revolved less around the question of exactly what happened during the interrogation, but more around the question of how the experience of interrogation could have changed the prisoner. The US liberal empire was claiming a space of interrogation where the prisoner could express his or her desire freely. North Korean and Chinese military interrogation rooms were offering the process of self-criticism as a way to refashion one’s own will and political consciousness. The Custodian Force of India and the India-led Neutral Nations Repatriation Committee set up “explanation rooms,” where state representatives could attempt to persuade prisoners to repatriate. If these interrogation rooms could transform, facilitate, or reveal people’s interiors, then another system of interrogation was created to evaluate and control those who passed through these rooms. South Korean paramilitary youth groups within the POW camps began incorporating tattooing practices in their interrogations, and American POWs created KKK-similar groups like the “Circle,” “which got its name from an incident in which its members surrounded and beat a prisoner who, they discovered, had written pro-Communist articles.”³⁶ Often, those beaten were American POWs from working-class backgrounds, or were black, Filipino, Puerto Rican. The struggles over people’s interiors—desires, hopes, politics—were embedded in practices and ideologies about race, whether about racial nationalism, imperialism, or militarism.

The Map of the Book

“The Elements of War”—part I of this book—charts the project of forging the new paradigm of liberal warfare by delving into the trans-Pacific histories of the interrogation room, the prisoner of war, and the interrogator of the Korean War. The first chapter, “Interrogation,” moves from Korea’s early twentieth-century struggles for sovereignty through the US occupation of Korea after liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. The story traces how the landscape of surveillance created under American military occupation on the Korean peninsula then transformed into the matrix of interrogation rooms for a war of intervention. The chapter on “The Prisoner of War” moves between the policy makers in Washington, DC, and the prisoners of war in the UNC camp on Koje Island. It focuses on the stakes for both the policy makers and the prisoners of war in rendering the prisoner of war from a bureaucratic category of warfare into a political subject on the Cold War decolonizing stage. The final chapter in this section, “The Interrogator,” begins the story in the Japanese American internment camps of World War II, and follows how the Japanese American subject moved from being an “enemy alien” under surveillance to laboring as an interrogator of Koreans during the Korean War. This chapter reconstructs the types of interrogation rooms these Japanese American interrogators invented, what they resisted, and what they reinterpreted.

“Humanity Interrogated”—the second half of this book—lays out the story of the Korean War through four different sites of interrogation. In “Koje Island: A Mutiny or Revolution,” we return to the site of the largest US- and UN-run POW camp during the war to go behind the barbed wire fence to follow the event that squarely placed the POW controversy onto the global media map: the kidnapping of the US camp commander by a group of mostly Korean Communist POWs. Questions about sovereignty, diplomacy, and international humanitarian law come to the fore as the chapter places the UNC camp on Koje Island in the same frame as the negotiating table at Panmunjom. The next chapter, “Below the 38th Parallel: Between Barbed Wire and Blood,” begins during the US occupation period as the mobilization of Korean

youth groups become key to the rightist regime and US counterintelligence network coming into formation on the peninsula. It then takes us through a network of US- and UN-run POW camps on the peninsula in order to examine the interrogation practices developed by the anti-Communist South Korean paramilitary youth groups inside the camps. The third chapter, “On the 38th parallel: The Third Choice,” takes us to the POW camp on the 38th parallel created by the Custodian Force of India that housed the neutral “explanation” rooms that the Indian delegation had proposed as a resolution to the negotiation impasse at Panmunjom over the topic of POW repatriation. Inside these explanation rooms, prisoners of war would have three choices in terms of repatriation: repatriation, nonrepatriation, or a “neutral” nation. It was an interrogation room for “neutrality,” an early manifestation of nonalignment’s vision. Moving from inside the explanation rooms the chapter then traces the journeys of seventy-six Korean prisoners of war who had chosen a “neutral country,” as POWs eventually found their way to Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, and India. The final chapter, “Above the 38th Parallel: The US Citizen–POW,” takes us into the POW camps and interrogation rooms created by the Chinese and North Korean militaries. From inside the interrogation room, the story of decolonization on the Korean peninsula in the mid-twentieth century did not stop at the question of liberation for the Korean people. This chapter asks what decolonization meant for American prisoners of war also. How the US POWs navigated a trans-Pacific surveillance system of interrogation—North Korean, Chinese, fellow POWs, and the US CIC—forms the central thread through this chapter.

Many of the historical experiences in this book are not to be found in either American or Korean history books. The contours of the Korean War’s absence from the pages of American history cast a long shadow over the genealogy of American interventions abroad. Telling the story of the Korean War requires not simply the offering of a narrative but an examination of the mechanics of our own attachments, repulsion, and investments in the narratives themselves. Inclusion in the pantheon of American wars of the twentieth century requires a national mythos, and the Korean War had inspired neither the national,

collective morale of World War II nor the national, collective trauma of the Vietnam War. The Korean War presents us with the singular opportunity to begin not with the question of why we remember or forget a war, but rather how we tell the story of war itself. It is, at its heart, a story about a crisis of political imagination.



FIGURE 1.1 Safe Conduct Pass issued by the United Nations Command—An example of the safe surrender pass that Oh Se-hui carried (National Archives and Records Administration)

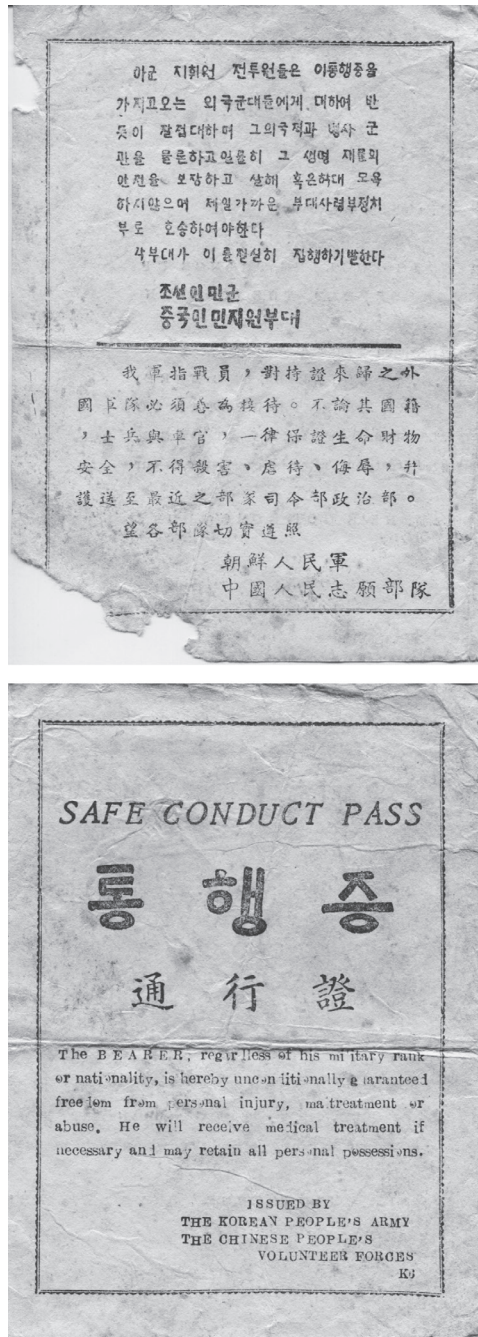


FIGURE I.2 Safe Conduct Pass issued
by the Korean People's Army and the
Chinese People's Volunteer Forces
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