

British Journal for Military History

Volume 10, Issue 2, September 2024

Review of *Prisoners of the Empire: Inside Japanese POW Camps* by Sarah Kovner

Daniel Milne

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 13 September 2024

Citation: Daniel Milne, 'Review of *Prisoners of the Empire: Inside Japanese POW Camps* by Sarah Kovner', *British Journal for Military History*, 10.2 (2024), pp. 160-161.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Sarah Kovner, *Prisoners of the Empire: Inside Japanese POW Camps*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. 328 pp. ISBN 978-0674737617 (hardcover). Price £28.95.

Prisoners of the Empire is an important critical analysis of Japan's treatment of Allied prisoners of war during the Second World War. It challenges the representation of the cruel and barbarous Japanese captor by exploring the diverse causes of POW suffering and high death rates, and positions their treatment within the wider historical context of Japan's engagement with international discourses and institutions for the protection of POWs. It makes a strong argument that Japan's mistreatment of Allied POWs should be seen not as unique and isolated but as a comparative case study through which to consider the mistreatment of enemy captives and international agreements.

The book pivots around the four case studies of Singapore, the Philippines, Korea, and Fukuoka (Japan), to give an overview of the treatment of prisoners across the empire. Kovner highlights how this varied depending on the camp's location, commander and personnel, and stage in the war. This is contextualised within Japan's efforts to establish its Pan-Asian empire, often by replacing western colonialism, persecuting communists, and exploiting Asian labour. It complicates the dominant narrative of Japan's captives as white POWs suffering at the hands of Japanese guards by highlighting alternative stories of POWs. These include those who changed sides and joined the Indian National Army; Japan's massacre of thousands of captured Chinese in Singapore and the Philippines; the widespread use of Korean and Taiwanese as camp guards; racist and colonialist attitudes prevalent among many white POWs; and the mass exploitation of Asians who laboured in perilous conditions alongside POWs. Kovner then extends her analysis to the post-war, pointing out that the Allies likewise exploited surrendered Japanese to establish their control over Japan's (and in many cases, their own) former colonies.

Through her case studies, Kovner explores multiple reasons why POWs were mistreated. These included the lack of powerful central bodies of oversight, the military's culture of unofficial punishment, the low status and power of camp commanders, the quality of camp guards – many of whom had little training and were employed by private companies, language barriers, food shortages and other deprivations that affected POWs, Japanese, and colonial subjects alike, and hatred directed toward POWs following the Allied bombing of Japanese cities.

For Kovner, the central factors behind POW abuse and fatalities, however, were poor planning, the Japanese military's indifference to prisoners, and decisions by the Allied leadership. Japan did not foresee and prepare for the surrender of more than 100,000

REVIEWS

soldiers in Singapore, nor for prolonged fighting in the Philippines, and only began to care about prisoners from 1942, when military authorities decided to use POWs to fill labour shortages. This policy led to the exploitation of Allied POWs in dangerous mines and other infrastructure projects, to which they were transported, along with Japanese military goods and personnel, on overcrowded 'hell ships.' Despite knowing the ships might hold POWs, the Allies sunk many of them, ships, making them accomplices in the deaths of thousands. Moreover, Kovner makes a convincing argument that one reason the Allies only began to aggressively accuse Japan of POW maltreatment from 1944 was that they wished to utilise this news to help excuse their future bombing of Japanese cities. Lastly, Kovner argues that 'show' camps in Korea, which had relatively low fatality rates, demonstrate that POW treatment could be relatively good when camps were well planned and run by a commander with political power. Though not one of Kovner's strongest arguments – good POW treatment was part of the camps' propaganda purpose – it does suggest what could have been if all camps had been better planned and managed and the military leadership's concern for POWs went beyond propaganda.

The book then shifts to the post-war period, and describes the fate of prison commanders and personnel prosecuted for war crimes. Kovner demonstrates that punishment was often inconsistent and sometimes politically motivated or legally questionable, and that as Cold War geopolitics came to the fore, war criminals were given clemency. Within this context, Japan's treatment of POWs was eventually framed as one of cultural difference; using the often-cited example that unlike the West, surrender was shameful for the Japanese. However, by tracing the pre-war shifts in Japan's perception of POWs and surrender, the book makes it clear that this culturalist interpretation was misleading and served to absolve people of responsibility. In the last chapter, Kovner returns to Japan's role in international agreements on the treatment of POWs, to explore how Japan's treatment of POWs was central to debates and decisions for the 1949 Geneva Conventions. While these were an important step in legal guidelines, the continuing internment of Japanese soldiers in Russia demonstrated the weakness of the Red Cross and international treaties.

Prisoners of the Empire is thus an important study of Japan's treatment of POWs and of the importance and limitations of international frameworks protecting POWs. It draws on an impressive range of primary sources, including many in Japanese, though is nonetheless accessibly written for a general audience. Beyond those interested in the modern history of Asia, Japan, and its international relations, it will appeal to those in military, war, and legal history, as well as in colonial and gender studies.

DANIEL MILNE

Kyoto University, Japan.

DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i2.1820](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i2.1820)