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PRISONERS OF WAR, CIVILIAN INTERNEES OR DANGEROUS COMMUNISTS?

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS, THE UNITED NATIONS COMMAND AND THE INTERNMENT OF KOREANS, 1950–1953

This paper examines the internment of the Korean civilians during the Korean War, 1950–1953. During the conflict, the South Korean forces, under the lead of American military authorities, had to handle some 40,000 internees and North Korean refugees. In particular, my postdoctoral project analyzes the conditions of detention in the South Korean camps. I argue that the revolts, violence and harsh conditions that occurred in internee camps should be examined through the ideological prism of the Cold War. This argument sheds new light regarding the treatment of civilians Koreans by United Nations forces by focusing on their relations with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the application of the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

The presence of Communism contributed to building a perception among American officers that some Koreans were highly dangerous individuals. The image of the enemy as a “fanatic” and an “extremist” communist significantly influenced captivity authorities to tighten internment policies. The paper explores the tension between the US and South Korean forces and the ICRC regarding the communist ideology in Korea, and to uphold of the Geneva Convention. Finally, this analysis of Korean internees also evaluates the work of the ICRC. As the only humanitarian agency authorized by the United Nations Command, the Red Cross delegates offered a unique insight into these operations, the attitude of the military towards internees and refugees, and how American officers justified policies in terms of international humanitarian law, and the “necessity” to pursue the global political warfare. At the end, Korean internees and refugees were not only captives in camps, but also prisoners of the Cold War ideology.

Jean-Michel Turcotte is a postdoctoral fellow at the Leibniz Institute for European History in Mainz. He completed a PhD in history at Université Laval, Québec, with a thesis exploring the captivity of German prisoners of war during the Second World War. His current research examines the relationship between military authorities and the International Committee of the Red Cross regarding the construction of international humanitarian law since the 19th century.