

## The Repatriation of Japanese POWs and the Early Cold War in East Asia

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The Cold War was, as scholars Liu Hong and Michael Szonyi correctly called it, a “battle for the hearts and minds”<sup>1</sup> of millions of people around the globe. In East Asia, this battle was particularly fierce, especially when the Chinese Civil War ended with the victory of Mao Zedong’s (1893–1976) communists. The Cold War was very intense on its peripheries,<sup>2</sup> where proxy wars divided newly-established nation states and where the superpowers supported different national factions to draw into or to keep a whole region within their zone of influence. Immanuel Wallerstein was therefore right when he argued that the Cold War in Asia was anything but “cold.”<sup>3</sup> The global conflict, nevertheless, was not only a war on land and on sea, but one fought in the imaginations of the people as well.<sup>4</sup> Both superpowers were eager to emphasize their own successes as a result of their “ideological” systems, i.e. of communism or Western liberalism. One group in particular that was the subject of debates and with regard to whom there were struggles in the case of early Cold War Japan were the Japanese prisoners of war (POWs) that remained in the Soviet Union in the years after the end of the Second World War. While the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP), General Douglas MacArthur (1880–1964), wanted to get them back to Japan as fast as possible, the Soviet influence on these men was also considered a menace with regard to the occupation of Japan, because a mass of communist veterans could pose a threat against the integration of the island country into the Western Bloc. MacArthur, who

1 Liu Hong and Michael Szonyi, “Introduction. New Approaches to the Study of the Cold War,” in *The Cold War in Asia. The Battle for Hearts and Minds*, eds. Liu Hong, Michael Szonyi and Zheng Yangwen (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010), 1.

2 For a more detailed discussion of the Cold War on its peripheries see: Frank Jacob, ed. *Peripheries of the Cold War* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2015).

3 Immanuel Wallerstein, “What Cold War in Asia? An Interpretative Essay,” in *The Cold War in Asia. The Battle for Hearts and Minds*, eds. Liu Hong, Michael Szonyi and Zheng Yangwen (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010), 19 and 24.

4 Benjamin Ziemann, “Situating Peace Movements in the Political Culture of the Cold War,” in *Peace Movements in Western Europe, Japan and the USA during the Cold War*, ed. Benjamin Ziemann (Essen: Klartext, 2007), 11.

“defined his role from the start as that of a sort of latter-day *shogun*, aloof from the masses of ordinary Japanese,”<sup>5</sup> was of course aware of the possible threat to his rule, especially since he was also being reminded about the danger of Japanese communism by press reports in the United States. However, since “a professional soldier was given the post of civil administrator in Japan,”<sup>6</sup> who tended to “impose democracy like a dictator,”<sup>7</sup> MacArthur addressed the issue of the communist threat to his position by conducting a red purge in 1949/50. The present chapter will elaborate on the role of Japanese POWs imprisoned in the Soviet Union during the early Cold War and the repatriation of these veterans to Japan, and it will embed their history into the ideological conflict between the US occupation forces there and the possible menace of a rise of communism in the East Asian country. As a first step, MacArthur’s rule in Japan and its character shall be discussed, before the struggle between the SCAP and the Soviet authorities over the fate of the Japanese POWs in the Soviet Union is taken into closer consideration. The image of Japan’s veterans, however, was twofold, which is why a further step will analyze how the fears of a communist menace represented by the POWs were perceived and addressed by the occupational government. The chapter consequently provides a deeper insight into the problems related to the role of former POWs and veterans in post-war societies in general, and to the question of the abuse of former POWs and veterans with regard to political conflicts in particular.

### MacArthur’s Japan

Douglas MacArthur, who would determine the fate of Japan during the occupational period, staged his rule from the first moment on, and he may have thought that he had been chosen by fate to rule the former enemy country.<sup>8</sup> As Allied Supreme Commander, South-West Pacific Area (SWPA), MacArthur had demanded the leading role in the Pacific theater of the Second World War

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5 Robert B. Textor, “Success in Japan – Despite Some Human Foibles and Cultural Problems,” in *MacArthur and the American Century: A Reader*, ed. William M. Leary (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 258.

6 Justin Williams, Sr., *Japan’s Political Revolution under MacArthur* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1979), 263.

7 John Gunther, *The Riddle of MacArthur: Japan, Korea and the Far East* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 9.

8 Mark Felton, *The Final Betrayal: Mountbatten, MacArthur and the Tragedy of Japanese POWs* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2010), 40.