



Conversion and Making the Anticommunist Body of Christ During the Korean War

Sandra H. Park

Abstract

During the Korean War (1950–1953), Christian evangelism went behind the barbed wires of the prisoner-of-war camps under the custody of the US-led United Nations Command to convert and transform the captured North Korean enemy into a subject assimilable into “free” South Korea—imagined by transpacific Christian actors as simultaneously Christian and anticommunist. This article examines the religiopolitical currents of wartime conversion as a conjoined project: the construction of the body of Christ as coextensive with the Cold War body politic of the US empire, reconfiguring ideas about the relationship between religious conversion and political subjectivity. Drawing on missionary records, media narratives, material objects, and photographs that circulated out of the camps, this article shows that wartime narratives framed the conversion of North Korean prisoners as not only a moral victory but also a flesh-and-blood victory. At the violent crossroads of Cold War empire-making and nation-building, the converted enemy prisoner emerged as a riveting figure whose conversion to Christianity and defection to “free” South Korea materially affirmed that the war against communism in Korea could be won. Situating the coercive conditions of conversion in a longer postcolonial, Cold War temporality, I argue that the Korean War POW ministry shaped enduring ideas about Christianity as a raw, material weapon for rolling back communism, intensifying the precarity and insecurities for “converted” prisoners seeking political and social belonging on the Cold War peninsula.

Keywords

Conversion, Korean War, Christian Evangelism, Postcolonial Cold War, POWs

For scholars of twentieth-century Korea, conversion as a category of analysis has largely referred to two distinct modern experiences: one of a political prisoner renouncing their “subversive” thoughts to accept the hegemonic ideology of the colonial state, and later the postcolonial South Korean state; and one of a “native” person experiencing a spiritual transformation through their acceptance of conversionary Christianity, often after an encounter with a missionary, evangelist, or revivalist.¹ Across the twentieth century, the Protestant missionary enterprise sustained by largely but not exclusively American Protestant bodies targeted human interiority to form new communities of believers in mission territories in Korea, while the Japanese colonial empire and the postcolonial state of South Korea sought to assimilate ideologically deviant individuals into the body politic for empire-/nation-building and wartime mobilization. To be sure, the overtly disciplinary and coercive politics—and not to mention the carceral conditions—of ideological conversion would seem to diverge from the supposedly voluntary and self-initiated experience of religious (Christian) conversion for Koreans encountering evangelistic enterprises, even when accounting for how white American Protestant missionaries were embedded in colonialist discourses and arrangements of power. Yet, the late colonial and early Cold War experiences with wartime mobilization in Korea point to “conversion” as contemporaneous religious and political projects that contentiously shared concerns over the making of subjects, for the body politic or body of Christ.²

While the Japanese empire’s conversion regimes and conversionary Christian missions are typically discussed separately, the currents of religious conversions and ideological conversions intersected in more ways than one in the modern Korean experience.³ Starting in the interwar years but intensifying during the Asia-Pacific War (1931–1945), the wartime Japanese empire disciplined subjects (both in the colonies and in the metropole) who disrupted the state’s project to make good imperial citizens (Krn: *hwangminhwa*, Jpn: *kōminka* 皇民化). This led to a flashpoint of conflict over the issue of public shrine attendance that reignited unresolved debates over the governance of mission-run schools, the religiosity of imperial Shinto shrines, and the reconcilability between Protestant theological doctrines concerning idolatry and the wartime scripts for performing civic

¹ In this article, I use “Korea” when I discuss the broader modern experience on the Korean peninsula from the late nineteenth century through the late twentieth century and the imagined Korean nation. Elsewhere, I refer to the specific political formation(s) or periods. For the post-liberation period under American military occupation (1945–1948), I use “southern Korea” at times.

² I am thankful for the thoughtful comments and questions Justin B. Stein provided throughout this paper’s development, especially as I took it in a different direction. I also want to thank the two anonymous reviewers whose comments helped improve this manuscript.

³ For a notable social and political history of the Protestant movement in modern Korea and its gradual acquiescent position vis-à-vis coercive state powers, see Chung-shin Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003). The early twenty-first century also saw emergence of critical reexaminations of Korean Protestants’ relationships to state powers to trace colonial and early Cold War genealogies of contemporary conservative evangelical politics in South Korea. See Kang Inch’öl, *Han’guk ūi chonggyo, chōngch’i, kukka, 1945–2012 [Religion, Politics, Society in South Korea, 1945–2012]* (Kyōnggi-do Osan-si: Hansin University Press, 2013); Han Honggu and Kang Sōkhun, eds., *Han’guk hyōndaesa wa Kaesin’gyo [Protestantism and Korean Modern History]* (Seoul: Tongyōn, 2020).

duties as imperial subjects.⁴ While the question of how to relationally understand and interpret Korean Christian resistance and compliance to obeisance at imperial Shinto shrines remains contested among scholars and practitioners, major Korean Protestant bodies, including the Korean Presbyterian Church's General Assembly, publicly complied with the mandates of the colonial government as the future of a postcolonial Korea disappeared for subjects living under the fascist wartime empire.⁵ In this late colonial space, it was largely theologically fundamentalist Presbyterians and pacifist Christians who remained openly defiant. Pivoting away from debates over how much Korean Christians collaborated or resisted, a binary in part reflective of postcolonial nationalist sensibilities and scholarly narratives that have traced mutually constitutive developments of Protestantism and Korean nationalism, the empire's pursuit of spiritual mobilization as a wartime mode of imperial subject-making brought to the surface the unstable and shifting claims about the boundary between "religion" and the imperial nation, and these contentions materialized in new forms in the years after liberation.

After the division of the Korean peninsula in 1945 in the wake of postwar arrangements of power in East Asia, Korean Christians soon had to negotiate between two mutually hostile nation-states that emerged out of the complex domestic sociopolitical strife and the rapidly bipolarizing global politics. In southern Korea below the newly drawn demarcation at the 38th parallel, the US military empire, which was also occupying and governing a postwar Japan now shorn of its colonies, underwrote the congealing of a hegemonic anticommunism that privileged Christianity's place in an American-sponsored Cold War nation-building—but not without raising unease around the propriety of it. As Jolyon B. Thomas argues, American occupiers in postwar Japan charged the former Japanese government with a form of "heretical secularism," having to reconcile the Meiji-era legal discourse debating and establishing secularity with the occupation's imperative to destroy "State Shintō," as part of a protracted discursive process of reconstructing, not bestowing, religious freedom as a universal right to the Japanese.⁶ Compared with the occupation's discursive sensitivities in Japan, American occupiers in Korea showed less discretion in their management of religious affairs. They redeployed much of the Japanese colonial government's categorizations of what constituted "religion" and tacitly privileged Protestant Christian claims to former Japanese religious properties "to strengthen a new type of relationship between the state and religion in a postwar Korea, favorable to

⁴ Several scholars in church history, missiology, and modern Korean history have examined the responses of various Korean Protestant denominational bodies, as well as American missions, to the compulsory Shinto shrine attendance edict during the war. In addition to Chapter 5 of Park's *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*, see Timothy S. Lee, *Born Again: Evangelicalism in Korea* (Mānoa: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010); Dae Young Ryu, "Missionaries and the Imperial Cult: Politics of the Shinto Shrine Rites Controversy in Colonial Korea," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 4 (2016): 606–634; and Paul S. Cha, *Balancing Communities: Nation, State, and Protestant Christianity in Korea, 1884–1942* (Mānoa: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022). For the *kōminka* project and colonial bureaucracy's management of religion in colonial Taiwan, see Chengpang Lee, "Shadow of the Colonial Power: Kōminka and the Failure of the Temple Reorganization Campaign," *Studies on Asia* 4, no. 2 (2012): 120–149.

⁵ On late colonial temporality, see Janet Poole, *When the Future Disappears: The Modernist Imagination in Late Colonial Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁶ Jolyon B. Thomas, *Faking Liberties: Religious Freedom in American-Occupied Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Christianity.”⁷ While the US military government claimed a position of non-interference in principle, the transformation of Korea into a hot theater of the global Cold War enabled the return of spiritual mobilization as a mode of wartime subject-making, this time a project shared by American and (South) Korean Christian actors.⁸

Beginning in the early years of the Cold War in South Korea under US military occupation, religious (Christian) conversion and political (ideological) conversion converged into a religiopolitical enterprise, as transpacific evangelistic endeavors laid privileged claims over emerging South Korean disciplinary institutions such as prisons and the armed forces. And during the Korean War (1950-1953), Christian evangelism went behind the barbed wires of the prisoner-of-war (POW) camps to convert and transform the “Red” enemy into a subject assimilable into a “free” society imagined as simultaneously Christian and anticommunist. This article examines the religiopolitical currents of wartime conversion as a conjoined construction of the body of Christ as conterminous with a cold war body politic during a war that not only transformed South Korea into a long-lasting hot frontier for the US empire but further gestated South Korea into an anticommunist society shaped profoundly by its wartime enmity with North Korea and alliance with the United States. Framed as a form of voluntary humanitarian care and spiritual ministering, the Christian POW ministry, with a white American missionary as its figurehead, aimed to turn captive enemy soldiers toward a Christian transformation of the soul and, by extension, an anticommunist political subjectivity in the carceral space of the camps.⁹

From these sites of wartime enemy internment, stories and images of the POW ministry circulated widely in American media, framing the conversion of Communist North Koreans as not just a moral victory but a flesh-and-blood victory counted in the bodies (and souls) of prisoners who converted and refused to return to Communist North Korea. Centered in these narratives was the materiality of their conversion. Material support from American Protestant bodies and individuals created a wartime evangelistic mission field, for which bibles, gospel tracts, musical instruments, and other mission-critical goods were transported from the United States to the UN-controlled POW camps along what Helen Jin Kim calls a “militarized transpacific highway,” bringing into focus how the “modern US

⁷ An Jong-Chol, “Modifying the Hague Convention? US Military Occupation of Korea and Japanese Religious Property in Korea, 1945–1948,” *Acta Koreana* 21, no. 1 (2018): 208–209. See also John Grisafi, “The Shaping of Religion Through Empire in Modern Korea, 1876–1948” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2025).

⁸ William K. Bunce, letter to William C. Kerr, February 16, 1946; Box 5773, Folder 9; RG 331; College Park, MD: US National Archives. In a letter to William C. Kerr’s reports from Korea, Bunce, chief of the SCAP Religious and Cultural Resources Division, outlined his thoughts on the policy of the Religions Bureau of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK). Bunce opined that while there might be a “better reason” for the military government in Korea “to give a mild sponsorship to Christianity that there is in Japan,” he believed that “benevolent neutrality” ought to be the modus operandi. This position morphed into one of explicit sponsorship when the scope of the SCAP Civil Information & Education division expanded to educating North Korean and Chinese prisoners of war (POWs) during the Korean War.

⁹ While there was a small Buddhist ministry for the Chinese POWs, as spotlighted in a *Korean Pacific Press* article, it was not following an evangelistic model like the one run by the Christian Department of Army Civilian (DAC) chaplains, particularly the Protestants. See Andrew Headland, Jr., “Koje-do’s Men of Faith,” *Korean Pacific Press*, April 18, 1952, Box 15, Folder 10–12, Mott (George Fox) Papers, 1941–1985, Hoover Institute. I thank James D. Hillmer for sharing a copy of this article with me.

evangelical empire was made on the route to American Cold War expansion in Korea.”¹⁰ While the racial assimilation of Korean Christians was integral to the making of the affective ties of the American evangelical empire, as H. J. Kim and others have discussed, witnessing the political naturalization of converted communists (North Koreans) into “free” South Korea enabled an expanded imagination of a Christian US empire. At the violent crossroads of Cold War empire-making and nation-building, the enemy POW emerged as a riveting figure whose conversion to Christianity and defection to “free” South Korea materially affirmed that the war against communism in Korea could be won. The gifts of gratitude that these converted prisoners forged, crafted, and inscribed made the raw materiality of their conversion explicitly present as testimonials of their transformation to American church bodies, convincing them that they were witnessing the efficacy of Christian transformation as a spiritual weapon. As Billy Graham put it: “the power of our God to change a rank Communist into a glorious Christian.”¹¹ By tracing these representations and self-representations in textual narratives and material objects that flowed between the camps and the United States, I show that this wartime POW ministry in Korea was not an ephemeral wartime religious activity but a significant rearrangement of religious claims on political subjecthood as North Korean POWs found themselves negotiating for their security in a postcolonial Cold War and a religious making of the US-led free world.

Conversion from Colonial Empire to Global Cold War

Starting in the nineteenth century, American Protestant and Catholic missionary societies began to formally constitute a Korea mission field as the United States established diplomatic relations with the Chosŏn kingdom after an armed expedition in 1871.¹² At the turn of the twentieth century, the Korean Empire (proclaimed in 1897) was negotiating its beleaguered place in a rapidly changing regional political order now dominated by a modern Japanese nation-state. As historian Paul Cha shows, the early missionaries’ concern that Koreans were converting to Christianity for material motivations, including political reasons, led to a systematized categorization of the stages toward conversion that sustained pervasive disciplinary power over Koreans’ pathway into church membership.¹³

¹⁰ Helen Jin Kim, *Race for Revival: How Cold War South Korea Shaped the American Evangelical Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 9–11.

¹¹ Billy Graham, “Introduction,” in Harold Voelkel, *Behind Barbed Wire in Korea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1953), 3.

¹² The US government dispatched an armed expedition to Korea in 1871 as a response to the Korean government’s destruction of the SS *General Sherman*, when the armed merchant ship defied Korean authorities in 1866. Referred to in Korean as *sinmi yangyo*, or the Western Disturbance in the Sinmi Year, some Korean narratives about Christianity, like Hwang Sŏk-yŏng’s novel *The Guest*, mark the *General Sherman* incident as the ancien régime’s first encounter with Protestantism. Aboard the ship was Welsh missionary Robert Jermaine Thomas.

¹³ Paul S. Cha, *Balancing Communities: Nation, State, and Protestant Christianity in Korea, 1884–1942* (Mānoa: University of Hawai’i Press, 2022), 56–75. Beyond the spaces of church-building, Protestant ideologies on discipline and spiritual transformation also influenced the ways in which early Korean nationalists like Yun Ch’iho imagined the “sovereign, self-disciplined (Christian) free laborer” as the archetype for the modern subject. See Henry Em, “Killer Fables: Yun Ch’iho, Bourgeois Enlightenment, and the Free Laborer,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 25, no. 1 (2020): 147–174.

The discontents and tensions that these unequal relationships engendered across racial lines surfaced repeatedly, most intelligibly during the Pyongyang Revival of 1907 but especially as the Japanese colonial government attempted to wrest colonial Korean subjects away from missionary domains of power during the Asia-Pacific War. Although many narratives of the early history of Protestant Christianity in Korea situate Koreans' receptivity toward conversionary Christianity in relation to the moral and social unmooring caused by the loss of Korean sovereignty on the world stage and loss of faith in traditional meanings, attention to how this also vexed relations between white (American) missionaries and Korean Christians points to anxieties over discerning proper Christian transformation and material/political motivations in the early practice of conversionary Christianity in colonial Korea.¹⁴ The unequal relations belied by this disciplinary power in ecclesiastical spaces became further complicated when the Japanese empire intensified its own scrutiny over the subjecthood of Koreans and their progress toward becoming good imperial subjects. When colonial Korea transformed into a Cold War frontier, conversion to Christianity took on the characteristics of ideological conversion, or *chǒnhyang*, and enfolded in it an entanglement of a kind of religious self-making and empire-/nation-building politics that had earlier been met with scrutiny and suspicion.

Chǒnhyang (Jpn: *tenkō* 轉向), or “thought conversion,” can be understood as changing or turning back (some)one’s direction or (misguided or wrong) political ideas, including one’s allegiance. Its historical origins are usually located in interwar Japan in the 1920s, with its introduction to Korea’s colonial space a bit later in the 1930s. Concerned with how the practice of *tenkō* in Korea was further complicated by the colonized status of Korean subjects, recent scholarly examinations of thought conversion in modern Korea have presented a range of critical insights. Seeing *tenkō* as a perversion of modern political sensibilities, Keongil Kim has meticulously noted the divergence between metropolitan and colonial practices of *tenkō*, arguing that “the conversion policy was engendered by force in the colonies, rather than by the spontaneity of individuals.”¹⁵ More recently, Hong Jong-wook has argued for a reading of *tenkō* for Korean subjects as “a project of overcoming colonial reality and forming a new subjectivity,” one that was “incomplete and located in a grey area between independence and assimilation.”¹⁶ Rather than seeing *tenkō* strictly as a totalizing, top-down force that induced the negation of one’s identity and compromised radical intellectuals (or outright resistance), Hong’s interpretation opens new terrain for examining thought conversion as a mode of subject-making, an effort to reclaim agency for colonized subjects in a wartime empire. The fractured self that such modes of subject-making engendered under the material and political conditions of colonialism has been examined by literary studies scholar Jeong Jong-hyun, who turns away from evaluating

¹⁴ See Cha, *Balancing Communities*.

¹⁵ Keongil Kim, “Japanese Assimilation Policy and Thought Conversion in Colonial Korea,” in *Colonial Rule and Social Change in Korea, 1910–1945*, eds. Hong Yung Lee, Yong-Chool Ha, and Clark W. Sorensen (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 214.

¹⁶ Hong Jong-wook, “Tenkō in Korea: Revealing the Critical Threshold of Colonial Empire,” in *Tenkō: Cultures of Political Conversion in Transwar Japan*, eds. Irena Hayter, George T. Sipos, and Mark Williams (New York: Routledge, 2021), 60–61.

“conversion literature” for its intensity of conversion in favor of focusing on the “legal and material conditions of conversion, on the author’s narrative strategy for dealing with the conditions, and on the subjectivity of the author.”¹⁷ These critical insights notwithstanding, scholarship on thought conversion has largely focused on leftist intellectuals, leaving many questions to be further explored.¹⁸

While often translated into “conversion” in English-language discourse, *chŏnhyang* in Korean does not commonly connote a religious conversion but often refers specifically to political or ideological conversion compelled by a state power.¹⁹ More specifically, academic discourses on *chŏnhyang* have largely focused on three distinct historical moments across Korea’s twentieth century: the conversion of leftists and nationalists to the Japanese empire’s assimilationist and total war ideology during the Asia-Pacific War; the Syngman Rhee regime’s nationwide campaign to surveil, incarcerate, and “rehabilitate” suspected leftists through the National Guidance League (*Kungmin podoyŏnmaeng*; 國民保導聯盟) from 1949 through the Korean War; and the systematic subjection of imprisoned political prisoners to anticommunist conversion schemes in authoritarian South Korea throughout the Cold War. As sociologist Dong-Choon Kim and other scholars have observed, there was an unmistakable postcolonial inheritance and remobilization of Japanese colonial political technologies by the anticommunist authoritarian state in Cold War South Korea, especially during the dictatorial rule of Park Chung-hee (1961–1979).²⁰ As early as 1961, transnational actors in Amnesty International began to note the South Korean government’s imprisonment of political prisoners, later organizing campaigns that called on the government to restore civil and human rights to these prisoners of conscience, as they came to be known. Many of these people would be imprisoned for more than thirty or forty years and classified as either “converted” or “unconverted” long-term political prisoners (*pichŏnhyang changgisu*).²¹ The ideological and carceral system of anticommunist conversion in South Korea places the Korean peninsula in a longer postcolonial and broader transpacific circuit of conversion as a mode for wartime subject-makings.

Similar to critical reexaminations of North Korea’s “enigmatic” political culture, scholars argue that *tenkō* was not a phenomenon peculiar to Japan but rather embedded in transnational responses to the “global crisis of capitalism, liberalism and empire” across

¹⁷ Jeong Jong-hyun, “Conversion Novels and the Conversion Narratives of *Kamsangnok* in Colonial Korea,” *Acta Koreana* 17, no. 1 (2014): 394.

¹⁸ A recent PhD dissertation offers critical insights into the Japanese colonial state’s interrogation of Korean Christians and American missionaries by situating it within the larger imperial culture of *tenkō*. See Sun Yong Lee, “Kingdoms in Conflict: The 1941 Women’s World Day of Prayer Case in Japanese-Ruled Korea” (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2025).

¹⁹ See K. Kim, “Japanese Assimilation Policy”; Jeong, “Conversions Novels”; see also Dong-Choon Kim, “Yusin ch’aeje (1972–1979) ha ‘chwaiksu’ chŏnhyang chŏngch’aek ūi yŏksa chŏngch’ijŏk sŏnggyŏk [The Policy of Conversion to Leftist Political Criminals During the Yushin Regime (1972–1979) and Its Historico-Political Characteristics],” *Sahoe wa yŏksa*, no. 134 (2022): 81–118.

²⁰ Dong-Choon Kim, “South Korea’s Conversion Policy Against Leftist Prisoners: Regime Security and Politics of Thought Control in Cold War Korea,” *Korea Journal* 65, no. 2 (2025): 109–130. “The coexistence of retributive and rehabilitative strategies created a complex penal system in which ideological loyalty was the anticommunist currency of freedom. The refusal to convert, even after years of imprisonment, became an act of resistance not merely to a political regime, but to a system of ideological domination rooted in colonial, military, and Cold War logics” (D.-C. Kim, 123).

²¹ Ingu Hwang, *Human Rights and Transnational Democracy in South Korea* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2022), xii, 48–49.

the metropole *and* the colonies, with attention to “*tenkō* of Koreans remind[ing] us of the importance of the historicity of the colonial empire” for any study of thought control or fascism in modern Japan.²² As discussed earlier, *tenkō* in colonial Korea was not only a total negation of one’s subjecthood but an uneasy remaking of it as Koreans sought to reclaim agency under the coercive conditions and contradictory logics engendered by the wartime Japanese empire’s assimilationist ideology and continuing realities of colonial subjugation.²³ In Cold War Korea after Japanese colonial rule, the division and emergence of two mutually hostile nation-states and the irresolute aftermath of the devastating Korean War engendered conditions of an unending, existential war and the ideological cohesiveness of the body politic became even more urgent for the two Korean nation-states.

Enfolded in anticommunist conversion in Cold War South Korea, as Dong-Choon Kim notes, were both retributive and rehabilitative logics: the anxious state aiming to simultaneously excise the body politic of ideologically contaminant threats and remold/re-groom deviant subjects, including captured North Korean agents, for possible (re-)incorporation into society. “Converted” prisoners continued to be shadowed by the surveillance regime after being released, while “unconverted” (*pichŏnhyang*) or “to-be-converted” (*michŏnhyang*) prisoners were continuously subjected to conversionary regimes behind bars. While the anticommunist *chŏnhyang* practices have largely been discussed as a political (read: secular) project, Christian institutions partook in the anticommunist conversion project by dispensing custodial care over released prisoners.²⁴ If the colonial *tenkō* and Cold War *chŏnhyang* reveal the circulation of colonial political practices of subject-making across the temporal divide of liberation in 1945, the POW ministry behind barbed wire during the Korean War reveals the rearticulation of Christian conversion as a spiritual remaking of the individual and a simultaneously political process of naturalization into an anticommunist South Korea guarded by the US military empire as a frontier for the “free world.”

While ecumenical and progressive Protestants and Catholics organized to protest the suspension of political rights and economic exploitation by the postwar authoritarian governments, such as the dissident movements led by Bishop Chi Haksun and Rev. Mun Ik-hwan, the more numerous theologically and politically conservative (including moderate) Protestant, as well as Catholic, leaders and organized bodies intently worked with the postwar anticommunist state to make Christianity the privileged source for anticommunist morality. In 1951, for example, Christian leaders and government officials institutionalized evangelistic Christianity in the form of the military chaplaincy for each

²² Hayter, Sipos, and Williams, eds., introduction to *Tenkō: Cultures of Political Conversion in Transwar Japan* (London: Routledge, 2021), xxv; Hong, “*Tenkō* in Korea,” 61.

²³ Hong, “*Tenkō* in Korea,” 61.

²⁴ Kim Dong-won, dir., *Songhwan [Repatriation]* (P.U.R.N. Production, 2003). Filmmaker Kim Dong-won first encountered Ryu Han-uk in Flower Neighborhood [Kkot tongnae], a Catholic nursing home where Ryu spent 10 years after being released from 37 years of incarceration. Kim Dong-won’s experience at the home left him feeling like “the place was detaining rather than caring for Mr. Ryu.” When asked whether he liked to read books by another former long-term prisoner, Ryu explained that he stopped reading after arriving at the home since the books he wished to read “aren’t welcome [at the nursing home].”

branch of the Republic of Korea military.²⁵ With the aim of spiritually strengthening the nation to withstand and fight against the threat of Communist North Korea, the South Korean military emerged as an intensely evangelistic space in South Korean society in the decades after the Korean War.²⁶ Outside of the military, which was being sustained through the institutionalization of compulsory military service in tandem with the resident registration system throughout the 1960s, prisons became another significant site for postwar Protestant evangelism in Cold War South Korea. In a story published in the *Korean Republic* on February 15, 1957, Gertrude Voelkel (née Swallen, 1897–1981), a Pyongyang-born American Presbyterian missionary, received a citation from the South Korean Ministry of Justice for “her voluntary service in teaching Christianity to former Communists at Seoul National,” resulting in “converting 109 convicts to Christianity and causing 60 to renounce Communism.”²⁷ While the figures and categories raise questions about whether the prisoners who renounced communism were counted among the 109 convicts who converted or whether prisoners who were charged with political crimes under South Korea’s draconian National Security Law²⁸ were counted and classified separately in this reporting, the publicization of this prison ministry indicates that Christian conversion was harmonizing with anticommunist ideological conversion behind bars.

According to self-reported figures, by 1960 Gertrude Voelkel and her co-missionary husband Harold Voelkel’s work in the Seoul Prison engaged 100 women and 700 men, respectively, in weekly worship services.²⁹ The use of disciplinary institutions for evangelism alone cannot explain postwar Protestant ascendancy in South Korea, but Christianity experienced the fastest rate of growth in the postwar decades, leaping from less than 3 percent of the pre-division population to 18 percent of South Koreans by 1970.³⁰ The postwar emergence of Christian ministries in disciplinary spaces like the military and prisons continued earlier projects to convert and rehabilitate ideological prisoners in penal sites in post-liberation and wartime South Korea, observable as early as November 1945 when southern Korea was under the United States Army Military

²⁵ See Vladimir Tikhonov, “South Korea’s Christian Military Chaplaincy in the Korean War: Religion as Ideology?,” *Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus* 11, no. 18 (2013): 3935, <https://apjif.org/2013/11/18/vladimir-tikhonov/3935/article>.

²⁶ Chengpang Lee and Myung-Sahm Suh, “State Building and Religion: Explaining the Diverged Path of Religious Change in Taiwan and South Korea, 1950–1980,” *American Journal of Sociology* 123, no. 2 (2017): 493.

²⁷ Newspaper clipping attached to press release, “American Lady Cited for Work at Seoul Prison,” *Korean Republic*, February 15, 1957; Gertrude Elizabeth Voelkel Papers in Foreign Missionary Vertical File Index (FMVFI), RG 360, Series III, Folder 2 (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Historical Society).

²⁸ Formalized in December 1948 amid the nascent South Korean state’s counter-insurgency war on Cheju Island and immediately after the Yō-Sun rebellion, during which left-leaning and otherwise sympathetic soldiers in the newly created Republic of Korea army refused to carry out orders on Cheju and rebelled against their command, the National Security Law served as an extra-constitutional legal accessory to legitimize the government’s suppression of any individual or group suspected as “anti-government” under the pretext of defending the nation against enemy forces, specifically North Korea.

²⁹ Harold Voelkel and Gertrude Voelkel, Letter to “Dear Friends,” November 23, 1960, Gertrude Voelkel Papers (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Historical Society).

³⁰ Lee, *Born Again*, 85–86. Defining Korean Protestantism as inherently evangelical, Lee documents the following statistical growth of evangelicalism (Protestantism) in South Korea after the Korean War: from at most 600,000 (2.9 percent of the population) in 1950, the figure increased to 1,257,000 (5 percent) by 1960, 2,197,000 (7 percent) by 1970, and 4,868,000 (13 percent) by 1979. Lee remarks, “from 1950 to 1980 the number of Protestants in Korea roughly doubled just about every decade, and from 1950 to 1985 the growth was more than tenfold” (p. 85). See also, Hyaewol Choi’s introduction to “The Sacred and the Secular: Protestant Christianity as Lived Experience in Modern Korea,” special issue, *Journal of Korean Studies* 25, no. 2 (2020): 279–289.

Government in Korea (USAMGIK, 1945–1948/49).³¹ Yet, it was the Korean War that proved the efficacy of Christian conversion for the rehabilitation of “Red” prisoners into the anticommunist body politic, and this wartime POW ministry was a transpacific enterprise that shaped the formation of a religiopolitical Cold War subjectivity in South Korea and the United States.

Conversion as Roll-Back for the Free World

Sometime in 1956, not long after the Korean Armistice Agreement quieted the guns and mortars along the Demilitarized Zone, missionary workers from the Evangelical Alliance Mission (or TEAM) and South Korean partners secured licensing from the South Korean government to establish a “powerful Christian radio station in Inchon” that would “not only preach the gospel in Korea, but would also fight Communism throughout the Orient.”³² At this time, there were only two other licensed radio broadcasting networks: the national Korean Broadcasting System (established by colonial government in 1927) and the Christian Broadcasting System (established in 1954 as a missionizing network). To the American evangelical missionaries and South Korean evangelists writing about the origins of this cross-border HLKX (the broadcast call sign assigned to the Far East Broadcasting Company) enterprise in the 1970s, Korea was “the last frontier of the Free World.”³³ Moreover, the port city of Incheon occupied a strategic position in what Bruce Cumings has called the American “archipelago of empire” to reach the Communist Asian countries of North Korea, China, and Mongolia, as well as the far eastern region of the Soviet Union (currently, the Russian Federation).³⁴

The HLKX radio ministry, which operates even today as the Far East Broadcasting Company, married popularizing new evangelistic technologies for cross-border evangelism to the Cold War Christian impetus to evangelize the “unreachable” on the other side of the so-called iron curtain.³⁵ During this time, numerous American evangelicals organized around supporting Christian believers and dissidents living under Communist governments in the Soviet Union and socialist Eastern Europe, embracing what Melani McAlister calls the “politics of suffering” through which American Christians saw themselves as “both persecuted victim and compassionate rescuer” as they visually

³¹ James David Hillmer, “Democratizing Punishment: South Korean Penal Reform and Cold War Subjectivity, 1945–60” (PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2022), 70–72.

³² TEAM HLKX Radio Korea, “The HLKX Story,” 7; accessed online via World Radio History Digital Database, <https://www.worldradiohistory.com/Archive-Station-Albums/The-HLKX-Story-Korea-.pdf>. TEAM was initially called China Alliance Mission at its founding, later changed to Scandinavian Alliance Mission, and then TEAM. Its central operations were primarily based in the United States and later expanded to Canada after World War II.

³³ TEAM HLKX, “The HLKX Story,” 3.

³⁴ Bruce Cumings, “Is America an Imperial Power?,” *Current History* 102, no. 667 (2003): 358–359. See also Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 393–396.

³⁵ For discussion on South Korea’s Christian Broadcasting System and domestic radio evangelism, see Paul Cha, “To Capture Minds and Wills’: Establishing Christian Radio Broadcasting in Cold War South Korea,” *Korea Journal* 60, no. 4 (2020): 143–168.

consumed images and words of suffering believers.³⁶ In Cold War East Asia, thanks to mid-century radio technology, South Korean and American evangelicals believed that they could convert people living in communist territories to Christianity. And in doing so, they sought to extend the imagined “free world,” a world that was commissioned to be Christian, across militarized, inter-national borders that demarcated the frontiers of the global Cold War. The logic of rolling back communism reflected in the HLKX’s cross-border evangelism first emerged as a significant pivot in US foreign policy toward North Korea during the Korean War when the United Nations Command troops crossed over the 38th parallel, resulting in a failed military operation and further shaping the violent underpinnings of Korea’s long religious Cold War. In US-supported Cold War South Korea, religious actors continued to battle communism by waging war over human terrain, understanding conversion to Christianity as both a spiritual and political (anticommunist) transformation.

To return to Incheon, the HLKX enterprise to spread the gospel and fight communism was not the first Cold War evangelistic project to emerge from this port city. Immediately after the early success of the US military’s amphibious landing at Incheon that scattered North Korean troops and enabled UN troops to recapture Seoul in September 1950, a fledgling Christian ministry targeting captured enemy soldiers began to take shape. It was amid the United Nations Command’s recapturing of Incheon and Seoul when American Presbyterian missionary Harold Voelkel (1898–1984) first wrote of the “fine evangelistic challenge” he saw in converting captured POWs to readers of his prolific “Dear Everybody” letters.³⁷ In a hospital for POWs set up in a former prison holding around six thousand North Koreans, Voelkel visited from “room to room where the former Reds were lying on straw mats, covered with an army blanket, with every imaginable wound and illness” and some “crying out in their agony of pain.”³⁸ A proficient Korean speaker who had labored as a Northern Presbyterian missionary in Andong before World War II, Voelkel addressed as many groups of prisoners as possible that day, “comforting them as best as I could under the circumstances attempting to point them to Christ and also to remind them of the evil of godless Communism.”³⁹ By late October 1950, the Protestant ministry was organizing outdoor worship meetings for six to eight thousand POWs who listened to chaplains and Korean church leaders calling for prisoners to repent and turn to God. As the war continued and the number of captured enemy prisoners increased, Voelkel emerged as the dominant figure and public face of the POW ministry, although several other American

³⁶ Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: The Globalization of American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 106.

³⁷ Beginning in 1929, Harold Voelkel worked as a missionary in the Korea field for the Northern Presbyterian mission. During the Pacific War when the majority of American missionaries were evacuated from Korea, Voelkel was an army chaplain. He returned to Korea after liberation and resumed missionary work under the USAMGIK.

³⁸ Harold Voelkel, “Dear Everybody,” Letter no. 4, October 9, 1950; Series 2, Subseries 1, Box 56, Folder 15; Moffett Korea Collection; Princeton Theological Seminary Library (PTSL).

³⁹ Voelkel, “Dear Everybody,” Letter no. 4.

Christian (predominantly Protestant) missionaries and Korean “assistants” were also actively involved in this wartime missionary work.

Indicative of how the early Cold War US government turned to religious institutions as allies in spiritually strengthening its now permanently standing military, Voelkel and other longtime missionaries to Korea, including Earl J. Woodberry who evangelized Chinese POWs, participated in the US military as civilian employees of the US Army, carrying the designation of the amorphous catch-all Department of Army Civilian (DAC) status.⁴⁰ This civilian status defined the scope of the civilian chaplains as separate from the regular military chaplains who were directly under the command of the newly reorganized Office of the Chief of Chaplains and ministered to American troops in training camps and on the frontline.⁴¹ During his wartime employment by the US Army, the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions formally placed the Voelkels on a leave of absence “in order that Mr. V may undertake a special service for the U.S. Gov[ernment].” However, Harold Voelkel remained a missionary. In fact, the board “understood that Mr. V and Mrs. V are to remain active mission[aries] of the B[oard] assigned to Korea but without sal[ary] or allowances until further action, except that the Bd. will cont. to carry share of pension payments.”⁴² Throughout the war, Harold Voelkel used the material resources of the US military and his denominational mission board to carry out the evangelistic work with the North Korean POWs. Initially employed to assist in the US military’s relations with civilians in allied and captured enemy territories, the quasi-military status for the DAC chaplains enabled Voelkel to access military privileges and envision a new kind of mission field in wartime Korea. Their civilian and non-regular army status afforded significant latitude in engaging with enemy prisoners under the humanitarian language of meeting the spiritual needs of interned prisoners, something that would later cause discomfort among US government officials. During the war, six to eight American missionaries and an unclear number of Korean church leaders hired as “assistants” to the DAC chaplains actively engaged in evangelism work in the POW camps that were placed under the aegis of the United Nations but ostensibly under the US military command.

The POW ministry began to take off under Voelkel’s direction after the construction of the sprawling Camp #1 on Geoje Island in January 1951 to intern the North Korean and Chinese POWs now numbering in tens of thousands. A boat ride from the southeastern port city of Busan, Camp #1 housed more than 170,000 North Korean and Chinese prisoners at its peak, and the Christian missionaries and their assistants became a regular presence in this camp, with the ministry quickly drawing outdoor worship crowds in thousands. By April 1952, Voelkel counted that out of around 15,000 prisoners who were in the POW church, 2,266 had been baptized (641 of whom were preparing to enter

⁴⁰ See William Imboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴¹ Given their auxiliary status, DAC chaplains occasionally stepped in to minister to American troops when needed.

⁴² Harold Voelkel, “Employment History Card,” Harold Voelkel Papers in FMVFI; RG 360, Series III, Folder 2 (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Historical Society).

Christian ministry after the war), another 1,571 were catechumens, and the remaining prisoners were preparing for the catechumenate (Figure 1).⁴³ This latter category likely included any and all who attended the outdoor worship services. As the war continued, prisoners languished in the camps, where dysentery was rampant and other bodily and psychological distress shaped the conditions of captive life. Added to that, the political stakes of the two Koreas at war and the debates over the terms of POW repatriation intensified the duress of being in captivity.



Figure 1. Harold Voelkel and assistant baptizing North Korean POWs. (Source: “Baptism Service,” Slides B84 (41), Presbyterian Historical Society, [Pearl Digital Collections, The National Archives of the PC\(USA\)](#), reproduced under [InC-NC/1.0/.](#))

Amid the POW repatriation issue emerging as the battleground between the two sides of the Korean War—with American negotiators introducing voluntary choice into an equation that had been formulated around a convention of repatriating prisoners to the government of the uniform worn at time of capture—North Korean POWs knew that the recording of their names in the ministry’s records would mark them not only as converts to Christianity but also as turncoats in the eyes of North Korean officials.⁴⁴ The prisoners who were categorized as “ministry candidates” were likely counting on the representatives involved in the armistice negotiations reaching a decision to implement “voluntary” repatriation as the principle for the exchange of POWs. This debate over the repatriation of POWs stalled the signing of a ceasefire and prolonged the war for two years, introducing another means of

⁴³ Harold Voelkel, “Chaplain’s Report: Kojedo Prisoner of War Camp, March 1951–April 1952,” Files on Deceased Chaplains, Call no. 20D-05_0519, Presbyterian Council for Chaplains and Military Personnel (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Historical Society).

⁴⁴ For scholarly examinations of the Korean War POWs, see Monica Kim, *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War: The Untold History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); David Cheng Chang, *The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

waging war in the face of a stalemated warfront.⁴⁵ Although political defection was not explicitly pursued in the beginning of the POW ministry, by the time the anti-repatriation movement emerged in the camps among those who would become known as the “anticommunist POWs” [*pan’gong p’oro*] in late 1951, the Christian POW ministry became a contentious arena for the war behind barbed wire between prisoners who remained loyal to the North Korean state (and opposed the principle of voluntary repatriation) and those who converted to anticommunism (including Christianity) and refused to be repatriated to North Korea. As violent flashpoints rocked the camps, media narratives began paying attention to the religious space. On April 18, 1952, the Washington Bureau of the *Korean Pacific Press* featured “Koje-do’s Men of Faith” on the front page of the issue, pointing to the “success” of the Christian ministry in the camps where “complete freedom of religion exists” and “the cathedral dome is the sky.”⁴⁶ In this spotlight on the Protestant, Catholic, and Buddhist activities in the POW camp on Geoje Island, which had been in the headlines owing to the violent riots and inter-prisoner conflicts over the repatriation debate, the reader was encouraged to equate captivity under American power with the bestowing of religious freedom and envision the Christian evangelistic ministry in the camps as a continuation of the missionaries’ longtime work in Korea (“1 percent of North Korean POWs were already Christians”) and a mode of rolling back communism through religious conversions. In other words, a discernible victory to come out of the war in Korea.

Witnessing the “Weapons of the Spirit” on the Frontline

While the Cold War American evangelical public’s consumption of the persecuted body of Eastern European believers engendered a self-image of victim-rescuer, the narratives and images of the converted North Korean POWs that circulated during the war elicited witnessing of not just suffering faith but faith in wartime action. In November 1951, Dorothy Adams of Berkeley, California, supplied a columnist of the local *Berkeley Daily Gazette* with excerpts from Harold Voelkel’s newsletter-like epistles that he wrote regularly throughout the war.⁴⁷ One reproduced excerpt came from a letter dated September 16, 1951. The letter detailed “one of the greatest experiences” of the missionary’s life. On Thursday of that week, around four thousand North Korean POWs invited Voelkel to a reception at one of the prisoner compounds. When Voelkel arrived that morning, the “whistles blew and all came to attention and [he] marched with the Korean leader past columns on either side.” Once he entered the gate, “a chorus on one side started singing the [South] Korean National Anthem and a little farther another group began a hymn.” Voelkel recalled that the “two numbers jarred a bit but that [it] didn’t make any difference to them.”

⁴⁵ Chang, *Hijacked War*, 94.

⁴⁶ Headland, “Koje-do’s Men of Faith.”

⁴⁷ Hal Johnson, “So We’re Told,” *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, November 1, 1951. The Adams family included several missionaries to Korea across generations, including Rev. Edward “Ned” Adams (brother of Dorothy). Dorothy Adams would have known that Voelkel’s ministry was among Koreans, but the column mistakenly attributed the stories in the excerpts to the ministry run by Woodberry with the Chinese POWs.

As the leaders of the POW gathering led Voelkel to the outdoor theater where a service was planned, the POWs sang “This is My Father’s World,” “Nearer My God to Thee,” and “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.” To Voelkel’s senses, the North Korean POWs’ singing of the South Korean national anthem and Christian hymns side by side registered as a confused performance, even as the prisoners’ embodied display of devotional fervor and disciplined organization profoundly impressed the missionary chaplain. Far from confused, the POWs’ insertion of their pledge of allegiance to the South Korean government into the worship liturgy suggests a deliberate endeavor to ensure that their public declaration of allegiance to the South Korean government authenticated the sincerity of their religious conviction in the eyes of Americans. At the same time, the fervor with which they disciplined themselves in performances of religious devotion made their political defection more convincing to the South Korean government under Syngman Rhee’s administration.⁴⁸ Soon, the religiopolitical conversion of these prisoners would command attention beyond Voelkel, the barbed wire, and the local gazette in Berkeley.

Beyond the “Dear Everybody” letters through which Harold Voelkel regularly circulated stories and reports, the POW ministry in Korea circulated through broader media reportage, especially authored by those who directly witnessed the gospel at work. In the *Christian Century*, editor Harold E. Fey published an eyewitness account of his tour of wartime South Korea in November 1951, during which Voelkel hosted him as a guest visitor to the camps. Although Voelkel was disappointed that Fey could not see the Sunday worship service, Fey visited the compounds for the daybreak prayer meeting that the prisoners held at 6:30 a.m. every Tuesday, in “semi-darkness.” Afterward, Fey expressed marvel. “I still can’t believe it,” Voelkel recalled him saying. Apparently, Fey had counted 4,800 individuals at prayer and singing hymns. While expressing a reserved anticipation of Fey’s write-up for the liberal magazine, Voelkel praised God for “the inspiration that meeting is to my own soul.”⁴⁹

Between January and February 1952, the flagship publication for moderate to liberal mainline Protestants produced a five-part article series by Fey detailing the human suffering caused by the war’s devastation, the state of relief aid work (including tensions between church relief work and the United Nations Civil Assistance Command Korea), and, most importantly, the war between Christianity and communism in the POW camps. Relations between the liberal Protestants and the fundamentalist-dominated Protestant missions in Korea were not particularly warm, but both saw a religiopolitical vision in the POW ministry on Geoje Island. After touring the POW camps as part of a larger trip to survey the Korean Christian church and the refugee crisis, Fey devoted the fifth and final essay of his series to the Christian movement in the POW camps. In “Korea Must Live!:

⁴⁸ The anticommunist/anti-repatriation movement in the POW camps became a significant bargaining chip for Rhee, who opposed the idea of a ceasefire that would leave Korea divided. Intent on reunifying Korea under the Republic of Korea, Rhee made his point by ordering a clandestine operation to release an estimated 25,000 anticommunist North Korean POWs from the camps in late 1953.

⁴⁹ Harold Voelkel, “Dear Everybody,” Letter, November 24, 1951; Series 2, Subseries 1, Box 56, Folder 16; PTSL.

Ultimate Issues at Stake in Ravaged Land,” Fey argued that Christianity in Korea was not some “rear-guard action” but on the frontline against “the onrush of victorious Asiatic communism.”⁵⁰ This frontline just happened to be behind barbed wire. Speaking of the camp, Fey described a war fought with “the weapons of the spirit” between two creeds. The essay explained that the educational program spearheaded by the Civil Information & Education (CIE), a division of the SCAP occupation government in Japan, allowed “the ideological struggle [to be] conducted fairly,” whereby both systems of truth—communism and Christianity—confronted each other “on the basis of equality.”⁵¹ However, the CIE’s secular pedagogy, Fey pointed out, only “loosen[ed] the mental chains of Communist enslavement to materialism” in this free competition between the two ideologies. True liberation from communist enslavement, Fey emphasized, came through Christian conversion, and there could be no greater evidence of the victorious Christ than the “tens of thousands” of communists who were being converted in Korea.⁵² These North Korean converts embodied the power of Christian “liberation” for all to witness through Fey’s published account.

Another contributor to the wartime reportage on the POW ministry in Korea was Douglas Bushby, an Australian UN war correspondent and a born-again evangelical who created a series of photographs of religious life among North Korean POWs in the camps.⁵³ During his stay in wartime South Korea, Bushby paid personal attention to Christian evangelistic and relief work and the Christian ministry behind barbed wire. Having “heard of [Voelkel’s] great work among the North Korean POWs,” he visited the Nonsan POW camp on the mainland, to where the prisoners who resolutely refused repatriation to North Korea and Voelkel’s ministry had been transferred in spring 1952 (see Figure 2). In *Adventures in Revival*, a testimonial memoir published by his own Bushby Evangelistic Association in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1953, Bushby wrote of how he “was fascinated by those hundreds of dark-haired men sitting cross-legged in neat rows, lustily singing the Lord’s songs on His own day” when he first encountered the converts.⁵⁴ This fascination stirred by the sight of former North Korean soldiers worshipping in disciplined comportment yet with spiritual vigor in their voice soon turned into a witnessing of Korea as “indeed a land of revivals.” In her book *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History*, Kathryn Gin Lum traces the religioracial category of the “heathen” into the Cold War, showing how the threat of communism on a global march “galvanized” conservative American Christians to extend the “cause of heathen uplift” into Cold War evangelical humanitarian impulses and developmentalism.⁵⁵ In the camp, Bushby’s narrativization of his witnessing of the praying

⁵⁰ Harold E. Fey, *Korea Must Live!: Eye Witness Story of the Human Situation in the Most Devastated Land on Earth* (as published in the *Christian Century*); Korea Materials (1949–1953)—1950–1952, 2 of 4; Box 66, Folder 3; Series 2, Subseries 2. This booklet reproduced the five-part series that originally appeared in the *Christian Century*. For the “Korea Must Live!: Ultimate Issues at State in Ravaged Land,” Haga notes the original print date in the magazine as February 20, 1952.

⁵¹ Fey, *Korea Must Live!*

⁵² Fey, *Korea Must Live!*

⁵³ These wartime photographs have been preserved and digitized by the Australian War Memorial.

⁵⁴ Douglas Bushby, *Adventures in Revival* (Tulsa, OK: Bushby Evangelistic Association, 1953), 65.

⁵⁵ Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 226–227.

“Red” enemy showed that the Christian gospel was truly at work in the bodies of former communists. Speaking of the donation of scriptures to the ministry behind barbed wire, Bushby claimed that thanks to “the gifts of God’s people, these men all had Bibles. And Communists were being called out of darkness into the light by the world of God.”⁵⁶ Yet, it wasn’t just for the work of global evangelism. As Bushby put it, “What a propaganda weapon for the free world! Reds turn religious!”⁵⁷ It was precisely the prisoners’ enthusiastic and completely voluntary embrace of Christianity that needed to be witnessed to believe in what Fey called “weapons of the spirit” in the war against communism.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P04641.209

Figure 2. A North Korean prisoner-of-war handing flowers to Bushby during a service, likely in the Nonsan camp. (Source: Australian War Memorial Photograph Collection, [Accession number P04641.209](https://www.awm.gov.au/record/P04641.209), reproduced under [CC-PDM-1.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).)

While the conversion narratives of the POWs were largely mediated to Americans through missionary letters, newspapers, and published memoirs by Voelkel and Bushby, the Christian prisoners made efforts to speak directly to American Protestant organizations, presenting themselves as a church in fellowship with their American counterparts. Close to seventy years after the war, a striking shield-like plaque now lies in the museum collection of the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, an archive of no small significance to scholars of early Protestant missions in Korea and subsequent transpacific church

⁵⁶ Bushby, *Adventures in Revival*, 66.

⁵⁷ Bushby, *Adventures in Revival*, 67.

relations, given the dominance of the Presbyterian Church’s Board of Foreign Missions in the Protestant missionary enterprise. The plaque was created and gifted by North Korean POWs while in captivity during the Korean War. The North Korean POWs took care to inscribe a message of greetings on each face of the shield—“Greetings, Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Korea P.O.W. Church”—beneath the image of a Christian cross nesting atop a lotus flower in full bloom (see Figure 3). For years after the war, this shield plaque adorned the wall of an office in the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions in New York City. Uptown from the Presbyterian headquarters, the American Bible Society also received a similar shield plaque from the POWs during the war as an expression of gratitude for “gifts” they had received from American church bodies while behind barbed wire.⁵⁸ The gift plaque sent to the American Bible Society was addressed from the POW Bible Institute, which was composed of POWs who were engaged in Bible study by correspondence.



Figure 3. Gift plaque from the Korean Prisoner-of-War Church, with Korean (left) and English (right) texts on either face of the shield. (Source: [Museum object #1645](#), Presbyterian Historical Society (PHS), Philadelphia, PA; reproduced under [InC-RUU/1.0/](#). I thank Lisa Jacobson and archivists at PHS for the digital reproductions.)

While the stories of the conversion of the prisoners in print media shaped a materially framed imagination of communism being rolled back in the body of each North Korean prisoner—made significant by the stalemated warfront that rendered a resolute victory elusive—the shield gifts brought to the fore not only the prisoners’ ingenuity and gratitude but also the material economy of Cold War evangelism during the war. In the American Bible Society’s *The Record* magazine issue of September 1951, the article accompanying a photograph of the shield gift informed readers that the prisoners must have repurposed the

⁵⁸ “We Have Something to Give Them,” *Bible Society Record* 96, no. 7 (1951): 99–100. I thank ABS’s Mary Cortado for providing a digital copy of the issue.

tin cans of US military provision circulating through the camp. And as Voelkel described it years later, “as the [POW] leaders of the compound churches learned of our missionary set-up they wished to express themselves gratefully to the Board that had sent me to Korea, and with nothing but empty, cast-off tin cans available as ‘raw material’ they demonstrated their gratitude and ingenuity and craftsmanship by producing the plaque.”⁵⁹ Readers of the published magazine and unpublished letter saw how the converted POWs had received gifts of bibles, instruments, and other mission-critical goods from organizations like the American Bible Society (via the Korean Bible Society) and the Presbyterian mission board, as well as food provisions from the US military, and converted these “gifts” into literal testaments of their gratitude and Christian transformation.

Across wartime Korea, repurposing or converting US military goods into shelter and other material forms was a ubiquitous mode of surviving the wartime conditions, as were the booming black and gray markets that emerged in Busan and elsewhere. Wartime narratives praising Korean Christians for their exemplary spiritual devotion amid these abject conditions abounded in published media. But as the prolonged war extended the material commitment of US military and relief aid, the increasing elusiveness of a satisfying victory in the first global armed conflict of the Cold War cast questions over the war’s outcome and its meanings for the efficacy of US military power and political leadership for the “free world.” In these beleaguered years of the war, Americans frequently encountered calls to help war-torn Korea by rescuing their orphans, aiding widows, and providing for the long-suffering congregations in wartime media, often sponsored by American Protestant figures and organizations.⁶⁰ At the same time, wartime narratives about Korean Christians emphasized not only their needs but their industriousness and unmatched spiritual fervor. Captured in a 1953 film by American photographer and documentarian Julien Bryan who collaborated with the National Council of Churches in Christ for the project, a Korean congregation rebuilt their house of worship by repurposing wood panels from crates that carried military equipment for American troops into floorboards and roof shingles for the church. Embedded in a larger narrative that attempted to construct an imaginary of a global Body of Christ stretching from postwar Europe to the “seething countries of the Orient”—specifically, the Philippines and South Korea—the Korea story, which includes the Christian ministry in Korea’s POW camps, closes Bryan’s film by highlighting the Korean Christians who may be recipients of wartime relief but model self-reliance and ingenuity in their fervent practice of Christian worship amid a devastating war.⁶¹

In a letter to an administrator of the Presbyterian Historical Society nearly twenty years later, Harold Voelkel added that “the story isn’t over yet for more than 150 of these fellows

⁵⁹ Letter from Harold Voelkel to William B. Miller, Manager of Presbyterian Historical Society, February 8, 1971 (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Historical Society).

⁶⁰ See Arissa Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

⁶¹ Julien Bryan, dir., *A People Without Fear* (International Film Foundation, 1953), accessed via digitalized copy. I thank archivist Dino Everett for providing access to a digitalized copy from the Hugh M. Hefner Moving Image Archive.

are now in the Christian ministry,” with a few engaged in foreign missionary work in Brazil and Uganda.⁶² Missing in these narratives that confidently map a linear passage from communism to Christianity, North to South, are the fraught politics of belonging and subjectivity that viscerally shaped the POW experience during and after internment. Likely one of the former POWs mentioned by Voelkel in his letter, Kang Hi Dong (1928–2023, Kang Hūidong) was one of the few North Korean POWs who chose to be sent to a “neutral” nation rather than be repatriated to North Korea or stay in South Korea. At the time of being captured, Kang was a Christian like many though not most other POWs in the Christian ministry. Recounting his POW experience, Kang detailed not only the bloody violence between the prisoners who remained “communist” and those who became “anticommunists” (“the fighting was so severe, killing each other”) but also the violent denial of any space in-between those two political choices. Speaking of his decision to leave the Korean peninsula when a third option of a neutral nation was presented, Kang recounted how he knew he did not want to return to Communist North Korea given his experience of its early years. But Kang also felt that “South Korea was really a strange place for [him]” and being so close to the north (where his parents and brothers were) would bring too much unhappiness. After first arriving in India, the group of “neutral nation” POWs had to wait some years for a country to accept them. In February 1956, Kang left New Delhi to resettle in Brazil, where he became an ordained minister and lived for the next forty-five years.⁶³

Whereas the American Christian narratives framing the shield gifts triumphantly assumed a completed passage from communism to Christianity, Kang’s oral history for the Legacies of the Korean War Story project in 2015 reveals the long shadows of the violent political crisis that shaped his time in captivity in the camps. The South Korean government viewed the decision to not resettle in South Korea (by opting for a third country) as a political defection and considered these former prisoners as politically unreliable, or “*persona non grata*” in Kang’s words. Out of fear that they would face discrimination, some of Kang’s friends from the POW camp who remained in South Korea concealed their identities as former North Korean POWs, although converted anticommunist POWs were touted as heroic figures in public discourse. Recounting a time when he visited a friend who was ministering a large church in South Korea after the war, Kang recalled that the friend asked him to not mention their past as enemy POWs. While not all former POWs concealed their wartime identities, the ambivalent critique of the politics of the Cold War Korean division and war in Kang’s narrative points to the multiplicity of religious experiences behind the barbed wires as well as a rereading of the “ultimate stakes” for the prisoners. If the ultimate stakes for figures like Fey lay in the victory of Christianity over communism in Asia, the stakes for POWs were more about securing a political and social life after the war. For

⁶² Letter from Harold Voelkel to William B. Miller.

⁶³ “Reverend Hi Dong Kang,” Legacies of the Korean War Story Archive, <https://legaciesofthekoreanwar.org/story/reverend-hi-dong-kang/>.

Kang, this endeavor seemed impossible on the Korean peninsula, so his decision disrupted the anticommunist/Christian moral geography.

Conclusion

During the Korean War, converting enemy POWs to Christianity across the power differential of captor–captive in the carceral site of POW camps resembled modes of wartime subject-making experienced in late colonial Korea under the wartime Japanese empire. It continued the invitation of religious intervention into disciplinary institutions that appeared early in US-occupied South Korea (1945–1948). If early twentieth-century missionaries felt unease over Korean converts and congregants engaging in nationalist politics, the conditions of the global Cold War and the mid-century American imagination of the Manichean war against communism overcame that unease by understanding anticommunist nation-building/empire-making in Korea—the site of a hot war—as spiritual and moral commissions that necessitated the direct intervention of Christian institutions and workers. In early Cold War South Korea, expressions of Manichean worldviews about Korea’s place in the bipolarizing world were never confined to abstract discourse but viscerally embodied. This is captured in the essay “Christianity and Communism” penned in 1949 by Rev. Han Kyōngjik (1902–2000), a towering figure in the history of Korean Protestantism. Referring to the first line of the *Communist Manifesto*, Han warned that the “beast,” not specter, that is rampant all over Europe is “now rampant over the whole land of Korea looking for people to swallow. Who will be the one to slay this beast? This image is the very red dragon in the Book of Revelation.”⁶⁴

As discussed in this article, the religious Cold War in Korea turned as hot as the war itself, and narratives about the wartime POW ministry behind barbed wire reveal that the bodies of converted North Korean POWs who refused to return to communism came to be imagined as corporealized spiritual weapons that only Christianity could effectively offer in the free world’s war against communism. By circulating images, stories, and material objects, the conversion of enemy soldiers in Korea (though many had encountered Christianity before the camps) brought to the surface the convergence of religious conversion/spiritual transformation and political defection/allegiance as mutually affirming and interdependent processes of self-making during the war. In fact, religious conversion entailed political rehabilitation of captured enemy soldiers into willing new Christian subjects of South Korea. With the stalemated warfront, the riveting story of the POW ministry provided evidence to mid-century Americans that the developmental potentiality of war-torn South Koreans depended on both material and spiritual aid.

⁶⁴ Kim Hūngsu, *Haebang hu Pukhan kyohoesa: yōn’gu, chūngōn, charyo* (Seoul: Tasan Kūlpang, 1992), 292–300. For more on Han, see H. J. Kim, *Race for Revival*; Jeongran Yoon, *Han’guk chōnjaeng kwa kidokkyo* [*The Korean War and Protestantism*] (Seoul: Hanul Academy, 2015).

This neat passage from communism to Christianity flattened the fraught politics of the wartime carceral space where captives established the “Korea P.O.W. Church.” As Kang’s self-narrative shows, being a Christian and rejecting repatriation to North Korea were not sufficient to be incorporated into the anticommunist body politic of South Korea, where the unresolved war only intensified scrutiny over the allegiance and political purity of subjects. Thus, former enemy POWs continued to negotiate for their political belonging, conditions that compelled Kang to opt for a “neutral nation” during the repatriation screenings. In 2015, Kang and two other former POWs visited Geoje City, South Korea, for the first time in more than sixty years since their captivity on the island during the war. This was a special visit arranged as part of the city’s collaboration with a documentary film production on the Korean War POWs who rejected repatriation but chose “neutral” nations. As told to oral historians for the Legacies of the Korean War Story project, Kang explained to reporters at the homecoming reception in Geoje city hall that he and others had wanted to transcend the bipolarized Korean peninsula to attempt a new life in a “free [*chayuroŭn*] world.”⁶⁵ For Kang, the diasporic life engendered by the war and permanent separation from kin in North Korea only “deepened anxiety about life.” A Christian but not a “convert” or defector to South Korea, Kang’s anxiety speaks to the precarity of securing a political and social life on the Cold War peninsula, a precarity that profoundly shaped wartime captivity and wartime religion.

Sandra H. Park is assistant professor in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Arizona. Her research lies at the intersection of modern Korean history, US empire studies, and the history of religion and the global Cold War.

⁶⁵ Ra Chegi, “제 3 국 택한 북한군 포로, 60 년 만의 귀향 여행,” *Han’guk ilbo*, August 10, 2015, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/201508101749582742>.

References

Primary Sources

Archival Collections

American Bible Society (electronically accessed)

Bible Society *The Record* magazine collection

Australian War Memorial Photograph Collection (digitally accessed)

HMH Moving Image Archive, University of Southern California
Special Collections (Films)

Moffett Korea Collection, Princeton Theological Seminary Library (digitally accessed)

Series 2, Subseries 1, Box 56, Folder 15

Series 2, Subseries 1, Box 56, Folder 16

Series 2, Subseries 2; Box 66, Folder 3

Hoover Institution Library & Archives (Stanford, CA)

Mott (George Fox) Papers, 1941-1985

Periscope on Asia, 1951-1952, 1947, 1954, Box 15, Folder 10-12

Presbyterian Historical Society (Philadelphia, PA)

Museum object #1645

Presbyterian Council for Chaplains and Military Personnel Records Call# 20D

RG 360, Series III, Folder 2 (Foreign Missionary Vertical File Index)

Slides Collection (B84)

US National Archives (College Park, MD)

RG 331—Records of Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II

Published Materials/Pamphlets

Bushby, Douglas. *Adventures in Revival*. Tulsa, Oklahoma: Bushby Evangelistic Association, 1953.

TEAM HLKX Radio Korea, "The HLKX Story," World Radio History Digital Database.

<https://www.worldradiohistory.com/Archive-Station-Albums/The-HLKX-Story-Korea-.pdf>.

Voelkel, Harold. *Behind Barbed Wire in Korea*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1953.

Films

Bryan, Julien, dir. *A People Without Fear*. International Film Foundation, 1953.

Kim, Dong-won, dir. *Songhwan [Repatriation]*. South Korea: P'urŭn Yŏngsang [P.U.R.N. Production], 2003.

Periodicals

Berkeley Daily Gazette

Bible Society Record

Christian Century

Han'guk ilbo [Hankook Ilbo]

Korean Pacific Press

Secondary Sources

An, Jong-Chol. "Modifying the Hague Convention? US Military Occupation of Korea and Japanese Religious Property in Korea, 1945-1948." *Acta Koreana* 21, no. 1 (2018): 205-229.

Cha, Paul S. *Balancing Communities: Nation, State, and Protestant Christianity in Korea, 1884-1942*. Mānoa: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022.

Cha, Paul S. "'To Capture Minds and Wills': Establishing Christian Radio Broadcasting in Cold War South Korea." *Korea Journal* 60, no. 4 (2020): 143-168.

Chang, David Cheng Chang. *The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020.

Choi, Hyaeweol, "The Sacred and the Secular: Protestant Christianity as Lived Experience in Modern Korea: An Introduction." Special issue, *Journal of Korean Studies* 25, no. 2 (2020): 279-289.

Cummings, Bruce. "Is America an Imperial Power?" *Current History* 102, no. 667 (2003): 355-360.

Cummings, Bruce. *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.

Em, Henry. "Killer Fables: Yun Ch'ihō, Bourgeois Enlightenment, and the Free Laborer." *Journal of Korean Studies* 25, no. 1 (2020): 147-174.

Grisafi, John. "The Shaping of Religion Through Empire in Modern Korea, 1876-1948." PhD diss., Yale University, 2025.

Han Honggu and Kang Sōkhun, eds. *Han'guk hyōndaesa wa Kaesin'gyo* [Protestantism and Korean Modern History]. Seoul: Tongyōn, 2020.

Hayter, Irena, George T. Sipos, and Mark Williams, eds. *Tenkō: Cultures of Political Conversion in Transwar Japan*. London: Routledge, 2021.

Hillmer, James David. "Democratizing Punishment: South Korean Penal Reform and Cold War Subjectivity, 1945-60." PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2022.

Hwang, Ingu. *Human Rights and Transnational Democracy in South Korea*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2022.

Imboden, William. *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Jeong, Jong-hyun. "Conversion Novels and the Conversion Narratives of *Kamsangnok* in Colonial Korea." *Acta Koreana* 17, no. 1 (2014): 375-397.

Kang, Inch'ōl. *Han'guk ūi chonggyo, chōngch'i, kukka, 1945-2012* [Religion, Politics, Society in South Korea, 1945-2012]. Kyōnggi-do Osan-si: Hansin University Press, 2013.

Kim, Dong-Choon. "South Korea's Conversion Policy Against Leftist Prisoners: Regime Security and Politics of Thought Control in Cold War Korea," *Korea Journal* 65, no. 2 (2025): 109-130.

Kim, Dong-Choon. "Yusin ch'aeje (1972-1979) ha 'chwaiksu' chōnhyang chōngch'aek ūi yōksa chōngch'ijōk sōnggyōk" ["The Policy of Conversion to Leftist Political Criminals During the Yushin Regime (1972-1979) and Its Historico-Political Characteristics"]. *Sahoe wa yōksa*, no. 134 (2022): 81-118.

Kim, Helen Jin. *Race for Revival: How Cold War South Korea Shaped the American Evangelical Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Kim Hŭngsu. *Haebang hu Pukhan kyohoesa: yŏn'gu, chŭngŏn, charyo* [A History of the North Korean Church Since 1945]. Seoul: Tasan Kŭlpang, 1992.

Kim, Keongil. "Japanese Assimilation Policy and Thought Conversion in Colonial Korea." In *Colonial Rule and Social Change in Korea, 1910-1945*, edited by Hong Yung Lee, Yong-Chool Ha, and Clark W. Sorensen, 206-233. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013.

Kim, Monica. *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War: The Untold History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Lee, Chengpang. "Shadow of the Colonial Power: Kōminka and the Failure of the Temple Reorganization Campaign." *Studies on Asia* 4, no. 2 (2012): 120-149.

Lee, Chengpang and Myung-Sahm Suh. "State Building and Religion: Explaining the Diverged Path of Religious Change in Taiwan and South Korea, 1950-1980." *American Journal of Sociology* 123, no. 2 (2017): 493.

Lee, Sun Yong. "Kingdoms in Conflict: The 1941 Women's World Day of Prayer Case in Japanese-Ruled Korea." PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2025.

Lee, Timothy S. *Born Again: Evangelicalism in Korea*. Mānoa: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010.

Lum, Kathryn Gin. *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022.

McAlister, Melani. *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: The Globalization of American Evangelicalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Oh, Arissa. *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015.

Park, Chung-shin. *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.

Poole, Janet. *When the Future Disappears: The Modernist Imagination in Late Colonial Korea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

Ryu, Dae Young. "Missionaries and the Imperial Cult: Politics of the Shinto Shrine Rites Controversy in Colonial Korea," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 4 (2016): 606-634.

Thomas, Jolyon B. *Faking Liberties: Religious Freedom in American-Occupied Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Tikhonov, Vladimir. "South Korea's Christian Military Chaplaincy in the Korean War-Religion as Ideology?," *Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus* 11, no. 18 (2013): 3935, <https://apjif.org/2013/11/18/vladimir-tikhonov/3935/article>.

Yoon, Jeongran [Yun Chöngnan], *Han'guk chönjaeng kwa kidokkyo [The Korean War and Protestantism]*. Seoul: Hanul Academy, 2015.