Ferber on Muminov, 'Eleven Winters of Discontent: The Siberian Internment and the Making of a New Japan'

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This is an unusual, perhaps even positively biased, book review. The first reason for writing from such an unusual perspective on this book is the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. The second one, which is probably less widely understood, is that the author of this review is originally from East-Central Europe and belongs to a generation whose parents bitterly experienced the hard version of “national” Stalinism and its consequences, especially internments.

Sherzod Mumino's indispensable monograph on the internment of six hundred thousand Japanese prisoners of war during WWII fills a void, and fills it extremely well. The author has several advantages: the ability to read all the necessary languages (Russian, Japanese, and English) to meaningfully utilize the original sources, an in-depth understanding of the USSR system in the Stalinist period, and excellent objectivity in analyzing Japan's role in the immediate postwar period and later.

The six hundred thousand Japanese soldiers and civilians who were captured and put into labor camps throughout the entire Soviet region (from Ukraine through the Far East and Sakhalin) as prisoners of war (POWs) certainly has been a challenging and at the same time very sad research topic for many historians. To mention a few, Andrew Barshay, Sandra Wilson, and Beatrice Trefault published monographs and several articles on the Japanese POW experience and their often tragic repatriation to their homeland.

However, the pioneering idea and well-researched focus of this book takes innovative steps: the Japanese internment is analyzed in global (international) context, linking the Stalinist regime's economic need to rebuild the country after WWII, US and Soviet economic and military competition in the Cold War period, and finally, Japanese postwar eagerness to be a reliable ally of the American strategy in East Asia.

The wartime prisoners of Japan were excluded from the victim discourse of Japanese history because they were unable to fight successfully against the enemy and therefore reminded Japanese society of the country's defeat. Moreover, Soviet internment camps without exception were one of the most efficient tools to rebuild the war-torn Soviet economy: in brief, POWS functioned as unpaid labor.

Nevertheless, the prisoners (or, as in American official propaganda, “slaves”) undoubtedly suffered: from hunger, the unbearable cold, and the poor environment. Despite all their sufferings, some of
them (maybe for their own survival) tried to understand and humanize what they experienced in the camps. A few of them, because the fall of the Japanese Empire and the total defeat of their country, began to show vivid interest toward the “new” Soviet system and were even sometimes attracted to it.

The Japanese soldiers and civilians (if they survived the camp) were eventually allowed to return to Japan, and by 1956 only those Japanese who had private connections with locals (husbands or wives) or those few who simply wanted to remained in the USSR.

In spite of the endless efforts of the returning POWs to reintegrate themselves into their homeland, in the darkest stage of the Cold War, that proved to be almost impossible. In addition, they were considered suspicious (similar to the prisoners in China) because they were labeled “Red repatriates.” There was no more alienating label than Red in the Japanese political system, where the communist and socialist dangers were equally demonized and, nationally and locally, equally denounced. Their situation is beautifully expressed by the author’s apt quote of essayist Sawachi Hisae, who describes the “Red repatriates” as like the “red-crowned crane because only the tops of their heads had actually turned red” (p. 255.)

Most of the repatriated POWs had a long and often hopeless fight with the Japanese bureaucracy to receive some compensation for their lost years. (The law on that was finally issued in June 2010.)

Reading this groundbreaking monograph, I could not help but to wish to have more on the East-Central European POWs and their economic contributions, but that of course would have required unlimited access to the Russian archives.

I would recommend this book not simply to historians of Japan, of the Cold War, or of Russian forced labor but to anyone who is interested how our past has built our present, from eastern Europe to Japan.


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