

The Unremitting Question About American P.O.W.s:
Were some taken from North Korea to the former Soviet Union?

By Donna D. Knox
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Early last year, the Coalition announced an upcoming review of evidence relating to the issue of whether Americans were taken from the theater of combat in North Korea and transferred to the Soviet Union. We expected to publish those articles throughout 2020. But then the COVID struck, life went haywire, and here we are in June of 2021. We are, however, ready now to do what we wanted to do a year ago.

When I thought about writing this series of articles, I intended to lay out the questions and then the answers, or lack thereof, in a neat, orderly fashion. But, when I sat down to write this first piece, I was overwhelmed by the boxes and folders and notebooks—all of which contain reports, transcripts of hearings, media coverage, archival research, and a great deal more. Suffice it to say that the so-called Live Prisoner Transfer issue is complex and uncertain.

I decided that setting out some history would be the best way to begin. In future articles, I will delve more deeply into details of certain sightings and reports.

The question of whether P.O.W.s were being held back was raised before the Korean War even ended. Officials noted discrepancies between enemy reports of how many men had been captured versus U.S. reports of how many men were missing. For example, a December 21, 1951, message from General Headquarters Far East Command references the 'incompleteness' of the P.O.W. list furnished by the Communists and goes on to 'assume' the inaccuracy was being challenged. It further states that Intelligence indicated there were live prisoners who were not named on the list.. (*Editor's Note: Complete documents are found on the Coalition's website: www.coalitionoffamilies.org*)

A September 2, 1952, CIA Information Report cites a 'source' that reported it was known that transit camps for P.O.W.s captured in Korea had been established in Komso-molsk-on-Amur, in the Russian Far East, and that American P.O.W.s were passing through those transit camps.

In December of 1953, the Assistant Secretary of the Army, Hugh Milton, issued a memo to the Army Chief of Staff requesting detailed information about 610 Army personnel who were listed by the U.S. as P.O.W.s but were

still unaccounted for. Interestingly, the information Milton sought pertained to education and technical skills, among other things, suggesting a concern that men with certain knowledge and expertise were being selected out and not acknowledged.

These are just three of numerous reports, memos, and other interactions within the U.S. government from early on that showed a growing concern that all was not as it should be in terms of the Communists' accounting for Americans who had been captured. Some six months after the Armistice was signed in July of 1953, the Department of State issued a report titled *Efforts to Secure the Return of American Personnel Who Might Still Be In Communist Custody*. The report stated that the United Nations Command had collected information from 'every known source' to make sure all prisoners were accounted for, and that careful screening of the information had produced evidence that there might be some personnel in Communist custody who were not returned during the prisoner exchange nor otherwise accounted for.

By this time, so many reports and resulting questions had leaked through the media that the American public and Congress began pressing for more to be done. Finally, then-Secretary of the Army, Robert Stevens, wrote a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense in which he recommended that the military, in concert with the State Department, form detailed plans to initiate diplomatic negotiations. Whatever plans they came up with yielded no results.

All of this is to say that the unexplained disappearance of some American servicemen who fought in Korea has been known for some 70 years. Were some of them taken to the Soviet Union? We still have no answers and the most oft-repeated explanation from our government is simply that there is 'no credible evidence' that men were taken and not returned.

I am an attorney. In a court of law, when evidence is put forth, it stands unless and until it is shown to lack credibility. The issue presented does not just go away because someone says they cannot prove the evidence to be right or wrong.



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The matter asserted and supported by evidence is deemed credible unless additional evidence shows affirmatively that it is not.

In light of the numerous reports that Americans were taken to the Soviet Union and not returned, an aggressive and thorough investigation should have been ongoing. But from what we have been able to ascertain, this is not the case.

At a hearing in September of 1996, then-Congressman Bob Dornan, who chaired the House Subcommittee on Military Personnel, referenced his 31 years of direct involvement with the issue of missing servicemen, as well as the past twenty months in which he had conducted a series of hearings in order to provide effective oversight of the fullest possible accounting of Americans still missing in action. In his comments Dornan referenced the 'lack of competence by an entrenched bureaucracy.' He further stated that "this shameful institutional performance is best described as an unrelenting predisposition to discredit and dismiss all information and reports that have merit and might lead to resolving cases of Americans known to have been alive in communist captivity."

At that same hearing, Colonel Phillip Corso (Retired) testified that he had been Head of the Special Projects Branch/Intelligence Division/Far East Command under General MacArthur. Upon his return to the U.S., Corso was assigned to the White House National Security Council, a position from which he handled 'virtually all' projects related to U.S. P.O.W.s. Corso testified as to several reports that Americans had been sent to the Soviet Union for intelligence exploitation.

I also testified at that hearing. As Colonel Corso and I sat together in a room waiting to be called, he confided in me that, when he shared this information with then-President Eisenhower, the President asked him what he would do if he were President: tell the American People the truth and risk war with the Soviet Union or hide the truth to protect peace and prevent additional losses. Corso told me his answer was to hide the truth. And that's what they did.

Congressman Dornan made an insightful remark at that hearing. He stated that, in the nuclear shadow of the Cold War, Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy were faced with a classic dilemma: risk millions of innocent citizens or leave American P.O.W.s in gulags behind the iron curtain. Dornan went on to say that, after the fall of the Soviet Union, there was no credible explanation for not utilizing this

country's vast resources to finally keep the faith and demand the fullest possible accounting. That was twenty-five years ago and we still have no answers.

At that time, the U.S. Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs (USRJC) was four years in existence. Part of the USRJC's mission was (and remains) to determine whether American servicemen were being held against their will on the territory of the former Soviet Union, and, if so, to secure their immediate release and repatriation. The Department of Defense's POW/Missing Personnel Office (called DPMO at the time) was tasked with providing analytical and investigative support to the Joint Commission. All of this was a positive step forward in terms of the government taking on the live prisoner



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transfer issue. That being said, the tenacles of bureaucratic delay and avoidance had not been fully rooted out.

In 1999, the U.S. side of the USRJC raised 'the Memoirs' with its Russian counterparts. The Memoirs is a diary, of sorts, compiled decades earlier by a Russian named Veniamin Dodin who lived in internal exile within the former Soviet Union most of his life. Dodin claimed to have, on multiple occasions, heard about, been told about, and seen evidence of Americans in the USSR against their will during the 1940s and 50s.

Nothing concrete came about in terms of an investigation by the USRJC until 2005. At its plenary session in Moscow that year, the two sides of the Commission agreed to fully investigate information contained in Dodin's Memoirs. They agreed to hold a second archival conference to advance relevant issues. The Russian side responded favorably to the proposal and various Russian archivists proposed discussion topics.

Unfortunately, DPMO's leadership disapproved of the initiative. A member of the USRJC at the time informed me that DPMO asserted that it's budget allocations would remain focused on more 'immediate' requirements, such as expanding its data base. The Commission member also told me that the Memoirs included, among other things, a diagram that purportedly showed where some twenty U.S. POWs from the Korean War were led from a Soviet mining camp, and that at least one of the names listed on the diagram matched that of a missing American serviceman. I am not privy to the details behind DPMO's decision. But, on the surface, it would appear that the agency declined to support a cooperative effort with the Russians that could well have shed informative light on the transfer issue.