

Traumatic Defeat: POWs, MIAs, and National Mythmaking. By Patrick Gallagher. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018) Pp. 200. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Patrick Gallagher offers the first transnational investigation of the origin, development, and decline of what is known as the secret camp myth in American history—a myth in which soldiers who had been declared MIA (missing in action) were rumored to be POWs (prisoners of war) detained by their captors in secret camps long after the fighting had ceased. The allegation that American POW/MIAs were forsaken in Vietnam is a popular topic in the cultural and political studies of the Vietnam War’s legacy. The secret camp myth has long been perceived as unique to the United States. Gallagher cogently challenges this notion by comparing such myth in the post-WWII West Germany with that in the post-Vietnam War United States. He highlights that while the post-Vietnam War political agendas and culture contributed to the longevity of this myth in the United States, the origin and propagation of such myth are similar cross-nationally.

Gallagher contends that the secret camp myths “evolve from two parallel needs within defeated nations, each of which serves to reinforce the other” (1). The first pertains to the POW/MIAs’ relatives “who often find themselves unable to mourn in the absence of a corpse or other conclusive proof of death” (1). The other comes from a defeated nation’s desperate attempt to assuage its own guilt for the war. By claiming that the POW/MIAs were abducted by the enemy, the defeated nations emphasized the missing soldiers’ suffering and portrayed them as victims. These soldiers were elevated to heroes resisting enemy barbarity and indoctrination in “morally ambiguous wars” making “celebration of traditional war heroes difficult” (2).

Chapters One and Three respectively discuss the birth of the secret camp myth in West Germany and the United States, especially what made it difficult to judge whether a serviceman was dead or alive, in captivity or not. In WWII Germany, the rising casualty rate on the Eastern Front rendered accurate report of casualties impossible. The situation was exacerbated by the Nazi policies and propaganda. For the United States during the Vietnam War, wartime confusion similarly prevented accurate reports of missing servicemen’s fate. The Nixon administration also intentionally exaggerated the number of POWs for its political agenda to prolong the Vietnam War. Chapters Two investigates how the secret camp myth was propagated by both the families of the missing men and politicians in West Germany in context of the country’s redemption and reconstruction. The myth generally disappeared in the mid-1950s with the release of remaining POWs from the Soviet Union and the rehabilitation of West Germany. In contrast, Chapters Four and Five interpret why a similar myth in the post-Vietnam War United States survived much longer despite the slight chance that Vietnam detained US prisoners after the war. There was never a comparably satisfactory conclusion to the POW/MIA issue in the United States as the radicalized myth advocates endeavored to deny the country’s defeat in the Vietnam War but pursue a victory by recovering the non-existent living POWs. Opportunistic politicians backed these advocates for their own political agendas. Charlatans and movie makers further reinforced the secret camp myth by turning it into a lucrative business.

To cogently analyze the trajectories of the secret camp myth both in the United States and West Germany, Gallagher considers a wide scope of factors that may have affected its birth and lifespan. These factors include the wartime and postwar policies, the efforts of the soldiers’ families to learn their loved ones’ fate, the demography of these families, the political culture, the reflections on defeat, and the stakeholders of the secret camp myth in these two countries.

He uses a broad range of sources in English and German, including official documents, POW/MIA activists' propaganda materials, news articles, and communication between the POW/MIA families and the authorities. Using this source basis, Gallagher convincingly identifies self-victimization of the POW/MIAs as the common reason for promoting the secret camp myth. In this framework, both the advocates of the myth and the politicians endorsing it defined the missing soldiers as blameless victims to obscure their countries' guilt in starting wars and committing atrocities. While his deconstruction of Nixon and Reagan's capitalization on the secret camp myth is comprehensive, his analysis of German politicians' exploitation of this myth, especially how chancellor Konrad Adenauer consolidated his power with it, is relatively brief, possibly due to the German myth's short life and the fact that Adenauer "determined not to allow independent action by activists and secret camp advocates to get out of control" (50).

Gallagher connects two fields of historiography, Germans' reflection on the WWII and the legacy of the Vietnam War, through identifying the transnational features of a society's response to defeat in dishonorable wars. His analysis of the secret camp myth in West Germany refers to multiple narratives of German post-WWII experience, some of which briefly mention the role of missing soldiers in obscuring Nazi war crimes and shaping the Cold War diplomacy of West Germany. This book is the first to focus specifically on the life cycle of the myth and extensively investigate how it enabled West German citizens and statesmen to create a narrative of victimhood, a key theme in the German post-WWII memory. Gallagher's book joins Douglas Clarke's *The Missing Men*, H. Bruce Franklin's *MIA: Mythmaking in America*, Michael Allen's *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, and Thomas M. Hawley's *The Remains of War* to trace the birth and propagation of the secret camp myth in the context of post-Vietnam War politics and culture in the United States, but it is the first monograph discussing the transnational nature of the secret camp myth.¹

While Gallagher's main conclusion is convincing, his book would benefit from two additional categories of evidence to investigate the motivations for propagating the secret camp myth in the United States. While it is practically impossible to track down German statesmen of the 1950s and POW relatives, it is feasible to interview the Vietnam War POW/MIA activists to learn how they corroborated this myth. The other genre of underused sources are the publications by these activists, which reveal how individuals acquired and (mis)interpreted military intelligence files of the missing soldiers, thereby perpetuating the myth. Like the Hollywood movies and the POW-rescuing campaigns advertised by swindlers and discussed by Gallagher, these publications convinced Americans of the secret camps but with seemingly authentic documents. Their authors asserted that the POW/MIAs were victimized by a duplicitous government, which was ignoring such evidence and betraying its citizens.

Traumatic Defeat will be of interest to military, political, and cultural historians and offers space for future academics to expand the field. Instead of simply elucidating the domestic impact of the secret camp myth, future academics should consider how this myth had impacted the West Germany-USSR and US-Vietnam diplomacy. After the Vietnam War, the repatriation of the POW/MIAs' bodies from Vietnam became the sole method to account for the POW/

¹ Douglas L. Clarke, *The Missing Man: Politics and the MIA* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1979), 114-116; H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America: How and Why Belief in Live POWs Has Possessed a Nation*, Expanded and Updated Edition (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 40; Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 6-9; Thomas M. Hawley, *The Remains of War: Bodies, Politics, and the Search for American Soldiers Unaccounted for in Southeast Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 49.

MIAs thus a countermeasure to the secret camp myth. Scholars can investigate how the return of remains affects political campaigns fueled by the myth. Based on solid scholarship, *Traumatic Defeat* makes a critical contribution to the literature on war memories by identifying the commonalties in defeated nations' tactics to confront the loss and guilts in morally questionable wars.

Liu Zhaokun
Carnegie Mellon University