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This book was many years in the making, and I can scarce begin to thank all the people who assisted me in writing it. I got the very earliest idea that grew into it while studying for my comprehensive exams as a graduate student in the History Department at the State University of New York at Albany, and great thanks go to Professors Dan White, Richard Fogarty, and Carl Bon Tempo, who helped guide my research and writing. The department also assisted me generally with travel grants, and with general support and assistance in my program overall. The Communications Workers of America, of which I was a member as a unionized graduate student, also helped me finance travel to various archives with its Graduate Student Employees Union Professional Development Awards program.

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Wars breed myths, and each war shapes its attendant mythology through its course and conclusion. One of the biggest determining factors to shape war myths is whether a given nation is among the victors or the vanquished. For the former, wartime mythology tends toward triumphant validation of whatever national virtues presumably led to victory, while the latter often tell stories and invent myths to explain their defeat, or find some way to cushion its impact. In some cases, defeated nations take this further and create myths centered on prisoners of war (POWs) and those missing in action (MIAs) to justify the lost struggle, mute national guilt for wartime crimes, and in extreme cases reject the very verdict of defeat itself. Born from POW/MIA activism, such myths hold that some MIAs survive in secret, undisclosed camps during and after the war, kept there by the enemy for various reasons.

Secret camp myths evolve from two parallel needs within defeated nations, each of which serves to reinforce the other. The first is born from the hopes of relatives of the missing, who often find themselves unable to mourn in the absence of a corpse or other conclusive proof of death. Trapped in a no-man’s land of grief, these family members cling to the idea that their missing men cannot be dead but rather must survive in secret enemy prison camps. Believers in secret camps can become so personally invested that
seemingly no amount of evidence against the existence of such camps is sufficient to change their minds, nor is any length of time without the return of the missing. The second is the need many feel to find something redemptive from the larger war experience. In particular, morally ambiguous wars make the celebration of traditional war heroes difficult, and so those searching for substitutes seize upon the figures of POWs and MIAs as acceptable replacements. By so doing, advocates of the alleged secret camps in which MIAs supposedly survive emphasize the suffering of those missing men as a way to highlight the real or imagined victimization of the nation at large. In this way, such advocates create a social space in which those who want to imagine themselves as victims-by-proxy of their own wars can do so. This process creates something redemptive for a defeated nation and also appropriates the suffering of the victims of that nation’s wartime atrocities, while simultaneously downplaying whatever responsibility the nation had for the war to begin with. Therefore, the construction of secret camp myths necessarily involves distorting the truth about the wars that spawn them, and it entails a retreat from reality both on a personal and national level.

This book presents two case studies of the secret camp myth: West Germany in the aftermath of World War II, and the United States after the Vietnam War. In the former instance, the myth was directed specifically at the Eastern Front and men missing in the Soviet Union, rather than those captured by the Western Allies. The American secret camp myth focuses on all US servicemen missing from war in Southeast Asia. Though both are predated by a French secret camp myth from World War I, these two instances have enough in common to be useful for the student of war and its aftermath. Specifically, both nations suffered extreme trauma by losing their respective wars, and both had a difficult time finding redemptive elements from their wartime experiences, in particular uncompromised war heroes. Lacking such heroes, both settled on POWs and MIAs as suitable substitutes; by focusing on them West Germany and the United States minimized their own feelings of war guilt and recast themselves as victims of wars they had started.

Though the cases are similar there are also differences, particularly with regard to the longevity of the American myth compared with the relatively short life of the German one. Indeed, German calls to bring the captives home had concluded by the mid-1950s at the latest, while to this day no self-respecting VFW or American Legion post is without its black POW/MIA flag. The likelihood of American MIA survival was considerably less plausible than in the German instance, particularly because the Soviet Union did in
fact retain large numbers of German prisoners following World War II and was at times inconsistent in reporting just how many and which prisoners it still held. Contrarily, there is no credible evidence that Vietnam covertly kept any American prisoners following the end of that war, and yet that version of the myth survives. It is a striking inversion: in the case where it was more plausible to believe in secret camps, such a belief did not last long, whereas in the instance where continued captivity was not all that likely, people adhered to such a belief for decades. This dissimilarity becomes all the starker when one considers the actual numbers of missing for each nation. Germany’s missing and unaccounted for numbered just over 2 million, the vast majority of whom disappeared somewhere on the Eastern Front. America’s missing in Southeast Asia reached only 2,255 in total. Even this number is a bit misleading, since just under half of these, 1,095, were never truly MIA or POW, but were instead known KIAs whose bodies were never recovered. Official reports on these men “Killed in Action—Bodies not Recovered” sometimes included them alongside actual MIAs, and sometimes not, further muddying waters already made murky by political demands for this or that man’s status to be shifted from the KIA to MIA category. By examining the secret camp myth as a larger phenomenon rather than as something specific to either Germany or the United States, this study will cast light on why the one concluded, and the other persisted, despite these disparities.

Germany fought a particularly atrocious war in all theaters, and especially on the Eastern Front. The United States, similarly though not equivalently, compromised its own image by the behavior and official policies of its military in Southeast Asia throughout the long Vietnam conflict. Though never a planned war of extermination like Germany’s war in Eastern Europe, America’s war in Southeast Asia included routine atrocity and massacre, despite a sort of collective amnesia that has since confined memories of such behavior to only well-publicized events like My Lai. Each nation’s respective civilian populations thus found their returning veterans to be less than ideal figures for national canonization, albeit not for exactly the same reasons. By the end of America’s direct involvement in Vietnam in 1973 popular support had turned decisively against the war and those who had fought it, though never as contemptuously as is still commonly believed. German veterans existed under the pervasive shadow of the Third Reich’s atrocities, despite efforts to whitewash the actions of the regular army. In both cases, regular veterans served as unpleasant reminders of things better forgotten. Contrarily, activist groups and concerned individuals elevated POWs and MIAs to hero status by emphasizing how their heroism lay in
their passive endurance of enemy captivity, the barbarities of which helped to downplay any involvement those men may have had in war crimes.

Germany’s partition into East and West following World War II led to two very different attitudes toward veterans. In East Germany, Soviet pressure, political ideology, and antifascism as founding state doctrine all contributed to clamp down on any major idolization of POW returnees and impeded the creation of a social space in which they could be recast as heroes. By contrast, West Germans found POWs in Soviet camps much more appealing since West Germans could identify with their suffering and thus reimage themselves through those prisoners as fellow victims of the war. When substantial numbers of West German prisoners continued to suffer in communist hands after the end of regular repatriations, civilians at home called for their return using language and images that borrowed significantly from Germany’s own wartime camp victims. In East Germany, the official line was that such men were justly convicted war criminals who did not deserve any such veneration. As a result, only West Germany had the political and social space for such a myth to develop, as well as no countervailing wartime narrative that might impede such development.

However, returning POWs at times proved to be less than ideal figures for such a transformation. Because they had firsthand knowledge of the realities of both the war and captivity, they could disrupt the careful construction of new national mythology via unwanted contradiction. POW/MIA activists found MIAs to be more compelling figures for national canonization. Conceptually, they were prisoners who never returned and archetypal soldier-victims, sublimely silent heroes-at-a-distance of uncomfortable wars that produced very little else worthy of pride or praise.

Americans and West Germans thus found the idea of secret camps attractive in more than one way. On a personal level, those trapped in the no-man’s land of grief could hold out hope that their missing man was somehow still alive in the secret camps and would come home someday, despite the increasing improbability of that ever occurring. On a larger level, those determined to wrest something useful from painful defeats could point to the alleged suffering of the men in the secret camps as evidence of how the enemy really was the villain of the war, and in some cases even how the aggressor nation was victimized by the war it started. Examining the ways these phenomena came about requires entering into the historiography of wartime suffering and loss, with a particular eye toward the progressing totality of victimization of soldiers through the twentieth century.7

The historiography of the German secret camp myth is bound to the
larger story of the German experience of World War II. More specifically, most work done on the subject has been part of larger studies on POWs and prisoner experiences, or just of the war experience generally. The missing do not seem to have warranted much study in their own right, so they often appear as a subordinate part of the prisoner/returning veteran story. Erich Maschke and Kurt W. Böhme's massive fifteen-volume *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des Zweiten Weltkrieges* remains a core work to which virtually all other writings on the subject refer, and it established the pattern of treating MIAs as an adjunct to the more-important POW story, itself a minority aspect of the larger narrative of the war. Subsequent works have largely adhered to this formula, as in James Diehl's *The Thanks of the Fatherland: German Veterans after the Second World War*, which focuses on how West Germany struggled to incorporate returning POWs. Of specific interest here is how Diehl details the evolution of POW/MIA advocacy groups such as the Verband der Heimkehrer, one of the early voices that called for diplomatic pressure on the Soviets to return their remaining prisoners, both real and suspected.

Nevertheless, within this qualified context there are some works that examine the German secret camp myth. Frank Biess's *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* explicitly mentions the concept—that hundreds of thousands of German soldiers remained in clandestine captivity following the purported release by the Soviets of all nonconvicted POWs—as one of the convenient fictions of the early Cold War. Biess describes how many people in West Germany embraced the idea of secret prison camps, bolstered in this belief by discrepancies in Soviet reporting on numbers of prisoners held as well as by opportunistic politicians and advocates who knowingly inflated hopes for MIA survival. Above and beyond any personal reasons for needing the myth to be true, adherents also found the myth easy to accept because of the way it facilitated coming to grips with Germany's catastrophic wartime losses by recasting the narrative into language of German victimization at the hands of its cruel conquerors. By advocating for the return of both real and imagined prisoners in Soviet custody, West Germans were able to transform those men, and by extension themselves, into co-equal victims of the war itself, while simultaneously deemphasizing their own role in perpetrating that war and its atrocities. Of equal importance, Biess discusses how popular agitation on the POW/MIA issue influenced Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's 1955 trip to Moscow, and how that pressure shaped the policies of his government, particularly in the realm of foreign relations.
More recently, Nicholas Stargardt’s *The German War: A Nation under Arms 1939–1945* also includes mention of the German secret camp myth. While Stargardt’s focus is primarily on why German society invested itself as totally as it did in fighting the war, he does also examine the manner in which wartime victimization was convenient for redemptive reimaginings of the war after it was over. Moreover, he cites firsthand accounts of Germans during the last years of the war openly drawing equivalences between their own suffering and that inflicted by Germans upon their various victims. He also examines the impact of Germans missing in the East on the home front, and how increasing casualty rates coupled with decreasing reliability of official reports led many to speculate about potential MIA survival in Soviet captivity.

Biess and Stargardt, however, are virtually the only authors to address the German secret camp myth directly, and those few others who do mention it tend to refer to Biess’s work. What is more, both authors treat it as a component part of the larger study of West Germany and World War II rather than a subject worthy of examination in its own right. Examining the secret camp myth as an international phenomenon helps to better uncover those common elements in both cases that contribute to its creation.

The American example has a more established historiography for POW/MIA issues and also the secret camp myth itself. H. Bruce Franklin’s *MIA, or, Mythmaking in America and Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* explore how the myth came into existence during the war in Vietnam and grew to become what he calls a virtual “national religion.” Franklin argues that however well-intentioned the original proponents of the myth were, driven by their need for the war dead miraculously to be alive, belief in MIA survival has ballooned far beyond the boundaries of plausibility, and indeed good taste. He finds less excusable how opportunists, both in government and elsewhere, took advantage of the emotional resonance inherent in POW/MIA activism for their own ends. The distinction between true believers in the secret camp myth and opportunists is best understood via the two mutually reinforcing needs that drive such a belief. In his understandable eagerness to address the many scoundrels who do exist within secret camp advocacy, Franklin sometimes downplays those whose belief was painfully genuine, due to being trapped in the no-man’s land of grief.

More recently, Michael Allen’s *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* builds upon Franklin’s analysis of the politicization of the myth, arguing that much of the myth’s durability came from the manner in which then president Richard Nixon co-opted
basic concern over POW return in an effort to channel interest in that issue into support for his administration’s policies, and indeed literally created the term POW/MIA out of formerly distinct and separate categories of POW and MIA. Like Franklin, Allen contends that the myth survives in the American popular consciousness due to a mix of politics and genuine popular belief. If anything, he goes further than Franklin in asserting the primacy of politics in keeping POW/MIA issues alive, though unlike Franklin he argues that earlier studies have overemphasized Nixon’s role.15 Both authors examine how cultural objects such as movies and video games reinforce popular acceptance of the core premise of the secret camp myth and indeed owe their existence and popularity to the common understanding of the basic structure of the myth. Here, one is unavoidably reminded of the existence of an entire category of action movies produced in the 1980s, the “Vietnam POW rescue” subgenre, including Rambo: First Blood, Part II starring Sylvester Stallone, and Missing in Action starring Chuck Norris, to which both Franklin and Allen refer.

Franklin’s and Allen’s works exist as part of the larger historiography of the Vietnam War, and both are primarily concerned with telling an American story within the context of America’s experience of that war and its aftermath, though Allen does briefly compare American proponents of the secret camp myth with the earlier German mythmakers.16 As a result, in both cases the myth comes across as a distinctly American episode born in the jungles of Southeast Asia, rather than a variant of an older international phenomenon. To be sure, Allen and Franklin are both chiefly concerned with writing American histories of that war and its aftermath, and neither is particularly weakened by this lack of focus on non-American examples. However, by focusing only on the American phenomenon they do ignore that those who created and developed the American secret camp myth were not breaking new ground so much as reacting to similar pressures that drove the creators of the earlier German myth. The secret camp myth is not unique to American cultural history, and it should therefore be examined in a broader context, which no author has yet done substantially.

The story of the secret camp myth is also a part of the existing historiography of warfare, loss, and mourning. Regardless of how cynics have manipulated the two variants of the myth for their own ends, the mainstay proponents of each were for the most part true believers. Their adherence to the myth is rooted in the difficulties they encounter in mourning, a broader subject that historians have examined in a variety of wartime and postwar contexts. Jean-Yves Le Naour examines a French example of this problem.
at the end of World War I that he refers to as a “refusal to mourn,” which so often plagues families of the missing.\(^{17}\) Indeed, Le Naour even mentions a French precursor to the secret camp myth dating from 1918, though he does not expand upon it.\(^{18}\) Going back further, Drew Gilpin Faust’s *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* argues that that war was the forerunner of the nightmares of the twentieth century.\(^{19}\) Of much closer interest, Faust describes how even in that earlier war, “the unknown fate of missing kin left a ‘dread void of uncertainty’ that knowledge would never fill.”\(^{20}\) Jay Winter’s *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* similarly examines how Europeans faced loss following World War I. Winter argues that the modernist interpretation of mourning following that war fails to consider adequately the traditional means of coping with grief.\(^{21}\) Like Faust, he does not fail to mention those relatives who were unable to mourn properly, due to the ambiguous status of their missing men.\(^{22}\) However, these stories remain secondary to his analysis of those who were, eventually, able to find ways to mourn loss. Focusing more directly on the case of the missing and the secret camp myth their status spawned delves more deeply into an important and little-explored facet of the larger story of postwar mourning: those who could not find a way to mourn at all.

Chapter 1 examines Germany’s war on the Eastern Front, from the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union to the fall of Berlin in 1945. It details the frequency and manner by which German soldiers became casualties over time, in particular how casualty rates rose while simultaneously reporting and records on casualty type and status grew increasingly unreliable. Lacking such information, many Germans had no real knowledge of whether their relatives were dead or alive, in captivity or not. This chapter also covers who exactly made up the ranks of Germany’s prisoners and missing, as well as where they came from within German military and society. Finally, it considers how Nazi ideology and indoctrination impeded the flow of what little information did exist concerning German POWs in the East, as well as how the Nazi state’s casualty propaganda actively misled the civilian population and distorted the realities of Eastern Front losses.

Chapter 2 examines the aftermath of defeat in the western occupied zones and subsequently in the Federal German Republic. It covers the slow, inconsistent way prisoners returned from Soviet captivity, and how rumors of MIA survival in so-called silent camps appeared in West German media. It also examines how German POW/MIA activism arose following the war—especially how use of iconography that borrowed more than a little from the images of the Holocaust recast German POWs in the USSR solely as victims.
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of communist barbarity. By portraying POWs and MIAs in that light, such efforts thus served as an avenue for all West Germans to reimagine themselves as victims of the war rather than as its perpetrators. The chapter also considers why this was so specifically a West German phenomenon, and why nothing equivalent arose in the German Democratic Republic. Most important, it details how West German POW/MIA activism peaked and subsided in the mid-1950s, unlike the much longer-lived American equivalent.

Chapter 3 details how US involvement in Vietnam led to its own men going missing, and how these men came from a narrow section of mostly middle-class professional officers in the air services, unlike the broader social origins of German POWs. Unlike the draftee masses who fought the ground war in Southeast Asia, the men around whom the American secret camp myth centers were mostly elites. The chapter also examines the loss statistics of the major US air campaigns, as well as how unlikely unaided MIA survival was considering the terrain over which several of those campaigns took place. In addition, it examines how American POW/MIA activism emerged during the war from a constituency of wives of the missing, who organized initially simply to try to obtain reliable information about the status of their men. The chapter then proceeds to show how self-interested parties within the Nixon administration actively worked to fold these activists into their own base of support and by so doing hijacked POW/MIA advocacy and used it in the service of prolonging the war itself. This politicization served to validate activist concerns initially, but the cynical manipulation of officials artificially raised hopes for POW survival far beyond what was plausible or even possible. This all but guaranteed that POW/MIA activism would continue after the 1973 repatriation of actual prisoners, since activists believed so many more were still alive, somewhere in Southeast Asia.

Chapter 4 explains how Watergate and the downfall of President Nixon helped to solidify the paranoid streak already present within American POW/MIA activism and led to the radicalization of those who remained active after 1973. Repatriation led to the departure of more reasonably minded activists and the ascension of the more militant, who were determined to find live MIAs. These activists would be satisfied by nothing short of the resurrection of the missing they believed were still alive in covert Vietnamese captivity, despite all evidence to the contrary. When a much hoped-for 1970s congressional inquiry into the POW/MIA issue failed to validate these beliefs and hopes, POW/MIA activism entrenched itself and helped set the stage for the revival of POW/MIA hysteria in the 1980s.
Chapter 5 shows how various elements brought the POW/MIA issue back to the forefront, most prominently via the popular and redemptive Hollywood retellings of the war in general and the POW/MIA aspects of it in particular. It also demonstrates how opportunistic private actors got involved in POW/MIA activism to bilk hundreds of thousands of dollars from desperate family members, telling false tales of secret prison camps and claiming to search for live prisoners, not one of whom ever emerged from Southeast Asia. With the not-insubstantial encouragement of President Ronald Reagan, popular belief in MIA survival grew, led to a second set of congressional hearings in the early 1990s, and even played a minor part in the fringe aspects of the 1992 presidential election. Congress again concluded that there were no live POWs in Southeast Asia after 1973 and likely never had been. American POW/MIA advocacy survived this second repudiation and against all odds continues to play a role, albeit diminished, in the national conversation concerning memories of Vietnam and related veterans’ affairs.

This study concludes with a final comparison of the two examples of the secret camp phenomenon. Through careful analysis of what they have in common, as well as where they diverge, it demonstrates how that phenomenon is a logical outcome of the desire to find some nationally redemptive element of lost, controversial wars. It also shows how such idolization of POWs and MIAs masks a refusal to accept the realities of war and can threaten to distort the honest telling of the history of such wars.