

Korea's Costliest Battle: The POW Impasse

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Few military professionals ever imagine themselves playing a vital role in complex peace negotiations with representatives of hostile foreign governments. Most think that's the purview of the civilian striped-pants set. But negotiations to end the Korean War were, from beginning to end, carried out by senior military officers on both sides. It's entirely possible that this could happen again in some future conflict, and just as possible that the fate of prisoners of war will be a major issue. In the last half of the 20th century, the fate of POWs has become a sensitive, emotional, and politically explosive subject.

Korea's costliest battle lasted a year and a half, and the total casualties on both sides exceeded 375,000.¹ It occurred around a peace table, and it was a battle over a single issue: the fate of approximately 132,000 Chinese and North Korean POWs held by the United Nations Command (UNC), and of the approximately 13,000 UNC POWs held in North Korea.²

The struggle began some 41 years ago, on 2 January 1952, when Rear Admiral R. E. Libby of the UNC delegation to the truce talks at Panmunjom dropped a veritable bombshell right in the middle of the conference table. The Chinese and North Korean delegates were stunned, then outraged, to hear that the UNC would not force any prisoner of war it held to return to his homeland against his wishes. Few people, including many of the men who fought in the Korean War, realize that if not for the issue of voluntary repatriation of prisoners, the war almost certainly would have ended in the early months of 1952.

The truce talks had begun on 10 July 1951, a little over a year after the North Koreans had invaded South Korea, precipitating what many feared to be the overture to World War III. In the first year, the battle had seesawed up and down the ill-fated 600-mile-long peninsula, resulting in incredible devastation and loss of life. Now both sides were dug in solidly, the war of maneuver had

ended, and the peace talks had begun. But both the talks and the war were to continue for another *two years*, during which neither side gained anything it hadn't already won when the talks began.

Why did it take two years of negotiation to end a war that neither side was winning? Even before the subject of voluntary repatriation came up, negotiations were hardly going smoothly. From the day the talks began, they were characterized by hostility and suspicion. In an uncharacteristically emotional cable to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Matthew B. Ridgway, who had succeeded MacArthur as Commander-in-Chief, Far East Command, referred to the communist delegates as "treacherous savages," declaring that "to sit down with these men and deal with them as representatives of an enlightened and civilized people is to deride one's own dignity and to invite the disaster their treachery will inevitably bring upon us."³ Harry G. Summers, Jr., in *Korean War Almanac*, writes, "Marked by bitterness and recrimination, the talks often broke down and were frequently boycotted by first one side and then the other."⁴ The delegates labeled each other's statements "incredible," "absurd," "arrogant," "illogical," "rude," "discourteous," "irrelevant," and "groundless."⁵

It took the negotiators from 10 July to 26 July 1951—more than two weeks—simply to agree upon an agenda. The communists insisted that one agenda item be an agreement that all foreign troops be withdrawn from Korea. The UNC delegation, led by Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy (Chief of US Naval Forces in the Far East), disagreed on the grounds that this was a political issue, and, as such, inappropriate for military leaders to discuss in arranging a cease-fire agreement.⁶ Finally, the communists were satisfied with a compromise. An item titled "Recommendations to the Governments of the Countries Concerned on Both Sides" would be added to the agenda. This, they evidently felt, would provide them with a sufficient opportunity to beat the propaganda drums in an effort to get United Nations (particularly US) forces off the Korean peninsula.

The agenda items were these:

1. Adoption of the agenda;
2. Establishment of a demilitarized zone;
3. Concrete arrangements for the realization of a cease-fire and armistice in Korea, including the composition, authority, and functions of a supervising organization for carrying out the terms of a cease-fire and armistice;

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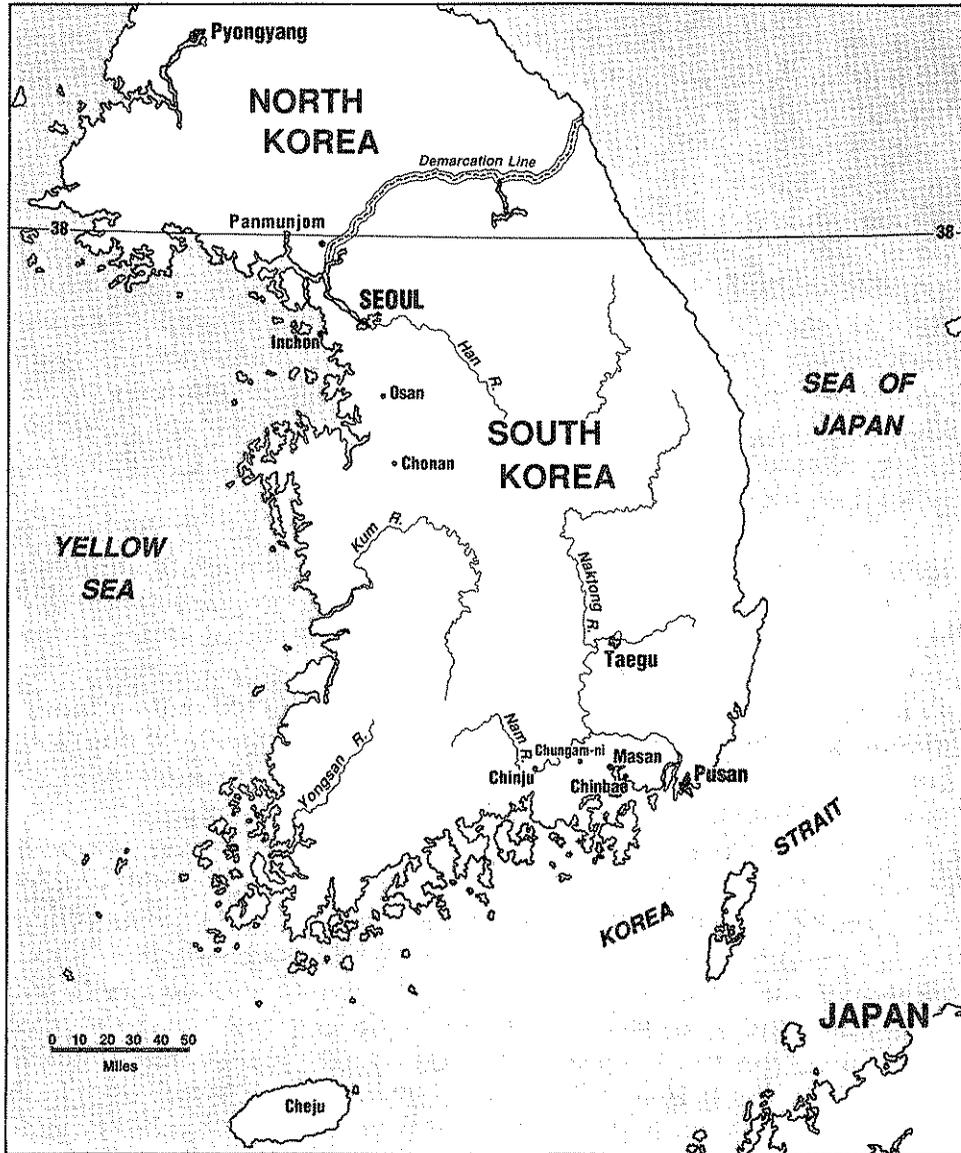


Major General Blackshear M. Bryan (2d from left), senior member of the military armistice commission, and Major General Lee Sang Oho (3d from right), chief communist delegate, exchange credentials at Panmunjom.

4. Arrangements relating to POWs; and,
5. Recommendations to the governments of the countries concerned on both sides.⁷

Having agreed upon the agenda itself, the negotiators turned their attention to agenda item number two in the closing days of July 1951. Since this item called for the establishment of a demilitarized zone (DMZ), the first step was to agree upon a demarcation line. Both sides would then withdraw their troops a specified distance on both sides of the demarcation line to form the DMZ. The struggle over where to draw the line was expected to be long and bitter, a forecast that proved absolutely accurate. The Chinese and North Koreans demanded that the demarcation line be the 38th parallel. They said that this had been the legal boundary between the two Koreas before the South Koreans had started the war by invading North Korea (!), and it was only logical and just that the armistice should restore that line. The UNC delegation maintained that the truce line should be the actual battle line. The UN forces held a considerable amount of hard-won territory north of the 38th parallel and were not about to give it up. "To have withdrawn our troops to the 38th parallel," Ridgway later wrote in his book, *The Korean War*, "placing them along a line that could not have been held, would have been indeed surrender."⁸

The talks ground on, with neither side budging an inch. At one point, on 10 August 1951, the intransigence reached its zenith when Admiral Joy said that the UNC would no longer discuss the 38th parallel at all.⁹ When the communist delegation protested this as an attempt to limit the discussion, Joy replied that the communists were free to discuss the 38th parallel among themselves, but that the UNC delegation would not take part. For the next two hours and ten minutes, both sides stared at each other across the table, with not a word spoken. Finally Admiral Joy broke the frozen silence by suggesting



that since they had reached an impasse on agenda item number two, they move to the third agenda item.¹⁰ The communists refused, and so ended another day at Panmunjom. Finally, on 27 November 1951, both sides agreed that the actual line of contact of the opposing forces would become the demarcation line, and that, when the armistice agreement was completed, both sides would withdraw two kilometers from it to form the DMZ.¹¹

The world breathed a huge collective sigh of relief. The worst, everyone thought, was over. The issue expected to be the most hotly contested, the only issue that seemingly could have deadlocked or even ended the peace talks, was at long last settled. It had been an uphill battle and had taken four and a half months, but now the end was in sight. No one expected serious difficulties to arise over the remaining items. And at first none did. Rapid progress (rapid compared to the struggle over the demarcation line) followed on agenda item number three, "Concrete Arrangements for the Realization of a Cease-Fire and Armistice in Korea."

These deliberations centered around machinery for enforcing the armistice, including setting up an armistice commission, inspections by joint observer teams, troop rotation, how to deal with armistice violations, joint aerial observation and photographic reconnaissance, policies on the rebuilding of roads, railways, and airfields destroyed or damaged during the war, and related matters. Despite initial tough stances taken by both sides on all these issues, compromises were reached, and only the issue of rebuilding the airfields presented any significant difficulties.

Thus, with agenda item number three now out of the way, the negotiators moved confidently on to number four, dealing with the disposition of POWs. Their confidence in disposing of this issue quickly was misplaced, however; in the words of Joseph C. Goulden, "within several days in early January 1952 the UN Command and the communists were at loggerheads on the issue that was to dominate the peace talks for eighteen more months."¹² Almost certainly, the communists expected the POW issue to be resolved in a matter of days. What they could not know was that on 29 October 1951 Harry Truman had rejected a complete all-for-all exchange of prisoners.¹³

Truman had been advised that many thousands of North Korean and Chinese POWs had told their UNC captors that they had no desire to go home. Many had been forcibly impressed into the Chinese Communist Forces or the North Korean People's Army. Others had been nominal volunteers who no longer had faith in the cause for which they had fought. Many, with their lives in shambles, simply wanted freedom and a fresh start. Consequently, Truman made the decision that no prisoner would be released to any nation against his will, publicly proclaiming that "we will not buy an armistice by turning over human beings for slaughter or slavery."¹⁴ In his memoir, *Years of Trial and Hope*, Truman wrote, "This was not a point for bargaining."¹⁵

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Many senior American officials and military leaders disagreed with the President. Secretary of Defense designate Robert A. Lovett cautioned against “bargaining with the welfare of our own prisoners.”¹⁶ General J. Lawton Collins, Army Chief of Staff, disagreed with Truman, as did the other members of the JCS.¹⁷ So did Dean Acheson, who said the President’s position was a violation of the Geneva Convention of 1949.¹⁸ Ridgway opposed voluntary repatriation on the same grounds.¹⁹ Turner Joy believed that the enemy would never agree to it and that the UNC was on unsound ground in demanding it.²⁰ But Harry Truman was adamant: the United States would sign no armistice that did not include voluntary repatriation.

Accordingly, the UNC dropped that bombshell on 2 January 1952. In *The Forgotten War: America in Korea 1950-1953*, Clay Blair writes that voluntary repatriation “infuriated the Communists, threw the negotiations into utter turmoil, led to bizarre twists and turns which enormously damaged the United States in the eyes of the world, and ultimately prolonged the Korean War for another year and a half, during which time United States forces suffered 37,000 more battlefield casualties.”²¹ Other historians agree.²² Walter G. Hermes writes that safeguarding the rights of nonrepatriates cost

over 125,000 UNC casualties during the fifteen-month period while the enemy lost well over a quarter of a million men. . . . Viewed from this angle, the precedence given the 50,000 nonrepatriates and the 12,000-odd prisoners held by the enemy over the hundreds of thousands of soldiers at the front raised a complicated question. In negotiating a military truce, should the prime consideration be for the men on the line and in action or for those in captivity?²³

The difficulty of this moral dilemma was compounded by the fact that Article 118 of the Geneva Convention of 1949 was unequivocal on the legalities of the matter: “Prisoners of war shall be released and repatriated without delay after the cessation of hostilities.” When the Korean War broke out, the United States had signed but had not yet ratified the Convention (it was ratified in mid-1951),²⁴ and on 4 July 1950 the United States had informed the Red Cross that it intended to abide by it.²⁵ Shortly after the war broke out, the North Koreans also announced that they would abide by the Geneva Convention of 1949.²⁶

Nevertheless, proponents of voluntary repatriation could, in their view, claim the moral high ground. First, Article 118 had not been written with a situation like Korea in mind. The intent of Article 118 (despite the unfortunate way in which it was worded) was to prevent a recurrence of what had happened after the end of World War II. The Soviet Union had kept thousands of German and Japanese POWs literally years after the war ended, and many had died in slave labor camps without ever seeing their homelands again. The framers of the Geneva Convention could not have foreseen a situation in which thousands of POWs begged *not* to be sent home.²⁷

Then too, there was at least some precedent for voluntary repatriation in American history. The Treaty of Paris of 1783 (which ended the Revolutionary War) had made provisions for voluntary repatriation. A number of the prisoners of war held by the Continental Army wanted to settle in the new United States of America rather than return to Europe, and they were permitted to do so.²⁸

Truman and other supporters of voluntary repatriation could also argue that the United States stood for certain ideals, one of them being freedom. They could argue that a country which willingly handed over human beings, against their wishes and pleadings, to communist dictatorships—and which at the same time announced it was fighting for freedom—was hypocritical at best. This view of America's mission was articulated in John F. Kennedy's inaugural address just ten years later and served as the philosophical basis of America's military commitment to South Vietnam: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and success of liberty."

Opponents of voluntary repatriation had arguments that were at least equally powerful. Shouldn't the United States abide by the Geneva Convention if it expected and demanded that other nations do the same? Even more fundamentally, isn't a nation's first loyalty to the men who fight for it, rather than to those who actively fought against it until their capture? Each day that the talks ground on in deadlock, more American soldiers and their allies died on the battlefield. Yet even if there had been no fighting whatsoever while the talks were going on, each passing day was still another day that American fighting men and their allies spent in Chinese and North Korean prison camps. And plenty of dying was going on in the camps.

Opponents of voluntary repatriation believed that American soldiers should not be kept indefinitely under such circumstances merely to guarantee freedom of choice for the men who had been killing their friends and allies and who had been trying to kill them. Even laying aside the moral responsibility of a nation toward its fighting men, opponents of voluntary repatriation could point out that more men on *both* sides died every day while the talks went on. Each day without an agreement meant that much longer that

men on both sides would spend in POW camps. One might therefore argue that the truly humanitarian course was to end the suffering on both sides.

By the first months of 1952, agreements had been reached on virtually everything else at Panmunjom. "In the interminable struggle in which each side labored for face," Max Hastings writes, "the fate of the prisoners held at the two extremities of the Korean peninsula remained the dominant issue. The prisoners. It always came back to the prisoners."²⁹

To find out just how many of the approximately 170,000 POWs it held actually wanted to be repatriated, the UNC conducted a screening in early April 1952. Most of the prisoners (132,000) were soldiers of the North Korean and Chinese armies; the remaining 38,000 were North Korean civilian internees. On 19 April 1952, the UNC informed the communists that only about 70,000 of these 170,000 people wanted to be repatriated.³⁰ The communists were predictably incredulous and outraged, and the revision of that figure upward to 83,000 by the UNC on 13 July 1952, as more accurate figures became available, didn't assuage their feelings in the least.³¹

Both the talks and the war continued to grind away for the remainder of the year, with no one gaining anything in either arena. As the world ushered in the new year of 1953, it seemed to many that the war would go on forever. Both sets of delegates at Panmunjom had unshakable orders from their respective governments: give no ground on the POW issue. People began to liken Korea to a meat grinder.

The deadlock finally broke in the early months of 1953, and to this day the reasons remain elusive.

For whatever reason or reasons, on 28 March 1953 the communists agreed to a UNC proposal put forward more than a month before, which they had rejected. The UNC had suggested an immediate exchange of sick and wounded prisoners as a goodwill gesture. Now, the communists not only agreed to that exchange, they said it should "lead to a smooth settlement of the entire question of prisoners of war, thereby achieving an armistice in Korea, for which people throughout the world are longing."³² China's premier, Chou En Lai, publicly endorsed what came to be known as "Little Switch" in a radio broadcast two days later, and Russia's Foreign Minister Molotov endorsed it two days after that.³³ Suddenly, inexplicably, light began to appear at the end of what had been a very long tunnel.

No one knows what influence the death of Stalin on 5 March 1953 had to do with what Bevin Alexander calls "the sudden melting of Communist intransigence,"³⁴ but some believe it was substantial.³⁵ Others suggest that the sudden progress in negotiations was due to American threats to use nuclear weapons or to unleash Chiang Kai-shek.³⁶ It is just as reasonable to credit America's unremitting military pressure all along the front and its stepping up of bombing attacks in the spring of 1953. By continuing to fight even as the

talks were going on, America demonstrated its resolve in a much more convincing and tangible way than words, or even threats, could have conveyed.

Thus the breakthrough came on 28 March 1953 when the communists agreed to an immediate exchange of sick and wounded prisoners. The agreement to exchange sick and wounded POWs was signed at Panmunjom two weeks later, and the actual exchange began on 20 April 1953 and was completed on 3 May. The communists turned over 684 UNC POWs, of which 471 were South Korean soldiers, 149 American, 32 British, 15 Turk, and 17 from other UNC countries. The UNC turned over 6670 POWs, of which 5194 were North Korean, 1030 Chinese, and 446 civilian internees.³⁷

Then, at 1000 hours on 27 July 1953, the armistice was signed. The guns fell silent 12 hours later. "Big Switch," the exchange of the remaining POWs, began on 5 August and ended on 6 September 1953. The UNC turned over a total of 75,823 prisoners; of these, 70,183 were North Korean and 5640 Chinese. A total of 22,604 prisoners held by the UNC refused repatriation: 14,704 Chinese and 7900 North Korean. The communists returned 12,773 prisoners: 3597 Americans, 7862 South Koreans, 945 Britons, 229 Turks, and 140 others. Of the UNC prisoners held by the communists, 359 refused repatriation: 335 South Koreans, one Briton, and 23 Americans.³⁸ Under the terms of the armistice, all prisoners on both sides who refused repatriation were turned



National Archives

A United Nations Command soldier freed under Operation Big Switch steps down from a truck upon his arrival in Panmunjom, 5 August 1953.

over to the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission in the demilitarized zone. There they were given 120 days in which, after listening to talks given by representatives of their side, they could change their minds. Two Americans and ten South Korean soldiers did just that, and 440 Chinese and 188 North Koreans changed their minds too. The final tally, then, of UNC nonrepatriates was 325 South Koreans, one Briton, and 21 Americans.³⁹ The 14,264 Chinese and 7712 North Korean nonrepatriates, when added to the approximately 25,000 released by Rhee on 18 June,⁴⁰ gives a final total of 46,976 Chinese and North Koreans who chose not to return to their homelands.

Most of the Chinese settled in Formosa, while the Koreans remained in South Korea. These figures spoke loudly and eloquently, but a terrible price had been paid. Between 10 July 1951, when the talks began, and 27 July 1953, when the armistice was signed, during those 575 meetings at which 18 million words were spoken,⁴¹ the killing and the dying went on unabated. Forty-five percent of all US casualties in the Korean War were suffered *after* the talks began.⁴² And most of these casualties were incurred when the only obstacle to an armistice was an agreement allowing voluntary repatriation.

Whether we were right in prolonging the war to achieve voluntary repatriation cannot be answered in any universal sense. A Chinese POW who went to Nationalist China to start a new life is almost certain to have a view different from that of an American POW who had to spend more than an extra year in one of the hell holes near the Yalu River to secure that freedom for his Chinese POW counterpart. And how does one answer for the killed and maimed, who paid an even higher price?

Did we learn anything? Did we carry anything away from this experience? Probably so. At the conclusion of the Paris peace talks ending the Vietnam War on 27 January 1973, neither the US nor South Vietnamese representatives balked at Article 6 of the Protocol, which stated, "Each party shall return all captured persons . . . without delay and shall facilitate their return and reception. The detaining parties shall not deny or delay their return for any reason."⁴³

We've learned that voluntary repatriation of POWs is a noble concept, but that it is also a luxury. No matter how desirable the outcome, we cannot hope to impose this doctrine on an enemy unless we have achieved absolute victory, at least not without paying an enormous cost in blood and national treasure. Before Korea, America had become accustomed to dictating terms to enemies who at war's end could only stand hat in hand, in the rubble of Hiroshimas or Berlins, and hope that the American terms wouldn't be too tough. Korea taught us that when one wages limited wars with limited objectives, one must be prepared to accept limited success at the peace table. When an enemy's army remains strong in the field, and when his government remains a going proposition, we have to be prepared to accept less-than-optimum results if we

expect to end the war. In the POW arena, that has come to mean getting all of our own people back or accounted for, and not concerning ourselves overmuch with the postwar aspirations of those we've captured. Like all lessons learned the hard way, we're not likely to forget it soon.

NOTES

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3. James F. Schnabel and Robert J. Watson, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy*, Vol. 3, *The Korean War*, Part 1 (1978) and Part 2 (1979) (Historical Division, JCS), p. 602.
4. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *Korean War Almanac* (New York: Facts on File, 1990), p. 49.
5. Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: Times Books, 1987), p. 943.
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7. Bevin Alexander, *Korea: The First War We Lost* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1986), p. 438.
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10. Walter G. Hermes, *United States Army in the Korean War: Truce Tent and Fighting Front* (Washington: GPO, 1966; rpt. 1973), p. 38.
11. Joseph C. Goulden, *Korea: The Untold Story of the War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), p. 581.
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13. Actually, Truman qualified his rejection of an all-for-all exchange. Such an exchange might be accepted if the enemy offered "some major concession which could be obtained in no other way." Schnabel and Watson, p. 684.
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15. *Ibid.*, p. 523.
16. Schnabel and Watson, p. 681.
17. Alexander, p. 454.
18. Goulden, p. 588.
19. *Ibid.*
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21. *Ibid.*, p. 962.
22. Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 305; David Rees, ed., *The Korean War: History and Tactics* (London: Orbis Publishing, 1984), p. 118; Alexander, p. 483.
23. Hermes, pp. 500-01.
24. Goulden, p. 587.
25. Schnabel and Watson, p. 673.
26. Hermes, p. 135.
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28. George G. Lewis and John Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army, 1776-1945* (DA Pamphlet 20-213, June 1955), p. 20.
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30. Blair, p. 965.
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32. *Ibid.*, p. 412.
33. Goulden, p. 630.
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37. Hermes, p. 514.
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39. *Ibid.*, p. 515.
40. Goulden, p. 639.
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42. Hastings, p. 329.
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