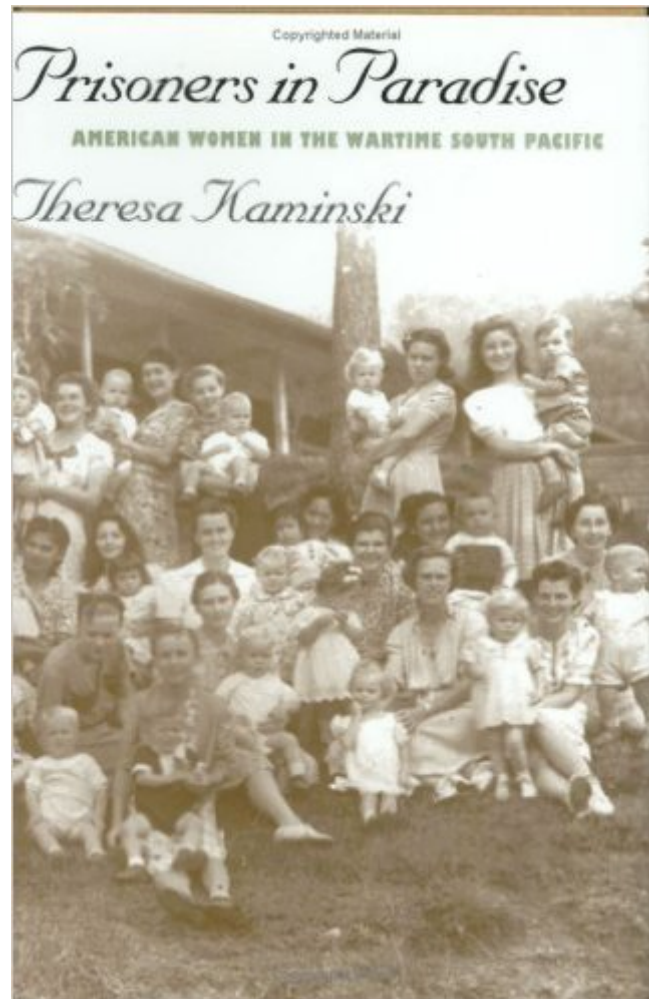


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Prisoners In Paradise: American Women In The Wartime South Pacific



Synopsis

While Rosie the Riveter and millions of American women fought World War II on the home front, other women witnessed the war firsthand. Many of them were overtaken by Japan's military offensive in the South Pacific and subsequently held captive. Theresa Kaminski chronicles their harrowing experiences in this moving testament to women in wartime. Although most of us are familiar with accounts of POWs, few realize that the Japanese imprisoned thousands of American civilian women in the Philippines during World War II. They were businessmen's wives and career girls, missionaries and teachers, nurses and mothers-and some were even spies. Many had grown accustomed to the good life in a colonial society, but after the Japanese invaded they had to learn to fend for themselves. *Prisoners in Paradise* is the most complete look at the experiences of these heroic women. Theresa Kaminski takes readers inside the internment camps to show how these women coped and how the experience changed them. Some took on leadership roles for the first time in their lives, while many found themselves doing work they had previously left to servants. They learned to stretch both the boundaries of acceptable behavior for women and the norms of motherhood as they struggled to meet the challenge of captivity. They fought to keep their families together, adjusting to changes in work habits and private lives under the watchful eye of their Japanese captors. They also kept up their morale by diverting themselves with fashion—however impromptu it might have been. While most civilian women were interned, others fled into the hills or adopted new identities to avoid captivity, relying on neighbors and former servants for survival. Kaminski shares their stories as well, such as that of an intelligence agent who escaped the Japanese to fight with—and serve as mother to—a band of Filipino guerrillas, and a spy known as "High Pockets" who got her nickname by smuggling documents in her brassiere. *Prisoners in Paradise* is the product of exceptionally wide-ranging research, drawing on interviews, letters, and diaries of internees. It shows how women under duress negotiated issues of gender and national identity in their struggle to survive, bolstered by their belief in what it meant to be an American woman. By sharing these little-known stories of perseverance and survival, Kaminski draws new profiles of courage that can inspire us half a century later.

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Customer Reviews

A good book informs and entertains. A great book informs, entertains and forces us to ask questions. Kaminski's book cannot be read without introspection. As she details a horrifying scenario, military detention of women and children on foreign soil, and delves into how that situation affected women's roles, the reader is compelled to ask, "What if this happened to me?" Is it better to keep one's head held high or better to feed your child? Is it better to uphold the vestiges of social class and civilization or is it better to put a roof over your children's heads? Over and over, Kaminski forces the reader to wonder, "What would I do in a similar situation?" Kaminski's depth of research and understanding of the topic shines on every page. These heroic women, until now so disregarded by history, owe her a great debt. For any person who marvels at the power of roles to dictate worthiness, this book is a must read. I wish we'd had this book when I attended women's studies classes. Thank you, Dr. Kaminski, for bringing this unknown part of history to light.

Fourteen thousand civilian Americans spent the years of World War II as "guests" of their Japanese conquerors. The author tells the story of more than a dozen American women who were interned by the Japanese or took to the hills to escape being captives. Most of the Americans were residents of the Philippines, but one was interned in Borneo, another on Celebes and a third in Hong Kong. The best known of the internees, Agnes Newton Keith, was a well known author before the war and wrote a chilling account, "Three Came Home," of her three years in captivity. Several of the other women also published their stories or were interviewed by the author. I can't think of anything more frightening than to be stranded with your children ten thousand miles from home in wartime and being totally at the mercy of a cruel enemy. Fortunately, the Japanese, for all their savagery in China, did not usually physically abuse the Caucasian women. However, hunger, isolation, and the fear of the unknown were potent factors. Perhaps the most amazing part of this story is how well and effectively the women coped with their fate. There is a bit too much of academia in the narrative.

The drama of the lives of the captives -- or those who evaded captivity -- could have been better exploited. The thematic approach taken by the author involved much skipping around from woman to woman and made it difficult to become familiar with them individually. But, the story is good and interesting, the research impeccable, and the book well worth reading by World War II buffs, feminists, and people interested in the impact of extreme stress on human beings. Smallchief

...one of hope and survival. The women come to life as their story is told of how they went from a life of leisure with servants to do the work for them to doing everything by themselves with little help from their men. Ms Kaminsky does an excellent job telling these women's story and her book is a great addition to my bookshelves.

What does it take to survive? What does it cost? This brilliant, fearless, absolutely page-turning book examines the plight of American women caught in the camps. The women in this book burst alive on the page with stories you just can't forget. Just beautifully written! Can't wait to read more from the very talented Kaminski.

My wife's aunt and uncle were POWs in Santo Tomas, so she read these accounts of the place.

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