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Situating the Korean War in British History

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Until recently, the Korean War has lived up to its most famous soubriquet – the 'Forgotten War'. When war broke out in the summer of 1950, just five years after the end of the Second World War, it seemed to many British people a far more distant, more ambiguous war. Britain had few historic links with the peninsula and the war's uncertain progress, protracted peace negotiations and eventual conclusion in 1953 did little to cement its position in the national consciousness. Few British novels and films explored the Korean War after 1953 and even historians largely overlooked it as a violent anomaly in Britain's post-war history, a period much more associated with the establishment of the welfare state than the continuance of warfare.

But publications like this highlight just how important the Korean War is in understanding post-1945 British history. Militarily, the British Army faced some of its harshest battles in Korea – most famously the Battle of the Imjin in April 1951, but also the Battles of the Hook (1952 and 1953) and 1,060 British servicemen withstood months of captivity as prisoners of war.[1] British service personnel were a mixture of the old and the new: young National Service conscripts served alongside veterans of the last war, called up from the reserve or remaining as regulars. Of the Army, Royal Navy and a small Royal Air Force contingent sent to Korea, 1,078 service personnel were killed.[2] Politically, the war posed awkward questions for Clement Attlee's post-war Labour government and exposed the weaknesses in Britain's international standing and relationship with the United States. In wider society, it prompted short-lived panics about the potential use of nuclear weaponry in the early stages of the war, the dangers of Communist 'brainwashing' techniques in prisoner of war camps and the threat of 'enemy from within' in Britain itself.[3] Many of these worries persisted after the war and came to define British culture in the Cold War. The Korean War also demonstrated just how much the long years of war between 1939 and 1945 had changed how ordinary people understood war itself and how they memorialised conflict in the post-war world, something that would shape how the Korean War was remembered – or forgotten.

Britain's Korean War is therefore not only an important episode in military history, but it had profound political, social, economic and foreign policy implications for Britain itself. This publication shows the many ways we can encourage learners to engage with the complex histories of the Korean War and the British role within it. This short introduction provides a brief overview of some key concepts and new approaches that historians have used when analysing Britain's involvement in 'the Forgotten War'.

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[1] Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War. Volume II. An Honourable Discharge* (London, 1995), p. 486.

[2] Estimates of the total number of British service personnel vary due to the lack of official statistics. Official historian Anthony Farrar-Hockley indicates a standing commitment of 27,000 but an overall commitment of 81,084 but it is unclear if this includes Commonwealth Forces, see Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War, Volume II: an Honourable Discharge* (London, 1995), p. 420.

[3] Anon., 'Sacrifice Now: Attlee', *Daily Mail,* 31 July 1950, p. 1.

Welfare, Warfare and Diplomacy in the Cold War World

Britain's Korean War must first be set against the domestic backdrop of post-war politics. Even before the Second World War had ended, people across Britain had begun to think about what they wanted Britain to be like after the war. Clement Attlee's Labour Party's manifesto *Let Us Face the Future Together* (1945) had promised an ambitious set of policies to promote economic reconstruction and social change after the Second World War. Labour's victory in the 1945 General Election led to a new programme of reforms, most notably social reforms, which many today see as the foundation of the modern 'welfare state'. These included acts regarding housing, national insurance and – most famously – the foundation of a National Health Service (NHS) in 1948.

The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 potentially challenged this welfare agenda. Minister for Health, Aneurin 'Nye' Bevan famously resigned from the Cabinet in April 1951 over the increase in defence spending due to the Korean War, which had led to the introduction of charges for false teeth and glasses. For Bevan, these charges challenged the foundational idea that the NHS should be free at the point of use. [4] Yet historian David Kynaston points out that one 1950 Gallup poll estimated that 78 per cent of people supported increased defence expenditure.[5] For all their emphasis on domestic reform the Attlee government had taken a strong line on foreign policy, in particular the foreign secretary Ernest Bevin and Attlee himself. In a radio broadcast in July 1950, shortly after the outbreak of the war, Attlee told listeners that 'The fire that has been started in distant Korea may burn down your house' and told them that Britain needed to stop aggression, as it had done in the last war. [6] For Attlee and others, the Korean War was not therefore a challenge to their vision of post-war Britain, but a necessary undertaking to protect it. As historian David Edgerton has argued, warfare as well as welfare thus characterised post-war Britain.[7] John Newsinger goes even further, arguing that the praise given to the Attlee administration for its domestic programme obscures the Labour's government's hard-nosed 'imperial strategy', such as its continued involvement in colonial wars and even its reluctance to grant independence to India in 1947.[8] In this way histories of Britain's Cold War – and its experiences in the Korean War – overlap with its complicated position at the end of empire, as well as the fluctuating demands of welfare and warfare.

Yet there are some who ask whether Britain should even be *included* in histories of the Cold War at all. Anders Stephanson argued that the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union was always at the core of the 'Cold War' and that to extend it beyond those two superpowers dilutes the meaning and usability of the term.[9] As Lawrence Freedman puts it, the

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[4] Helen Jones, *Health and Society in Twentieth Century Britain;* Aneurin Bevan*, In Place of Fear* (New edn. reprinted, Weybridge, 2008 of orig. edn, 1952).

[5] *Ibid.,* p. 548.

[6] Quoted in 'Sacrifice Now: Attlee', *Daily Mail,* 31 July 1950, 1.

[7] David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain 1920–1970* (New York, 2006).

[8] John Newsinger article, 'War, Empire and the Attlee Government, 1945-1951', *Race & Class,* 60,1(2018), 62.

[9] Anders Stephanson, 'Cold War Degree Zero', in Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell (eds), *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War,* (New York, 2012), pp. 19-49.

Cold War is not '*everything* that happened *everywhere* between 1945 and 1991'.[10] Yet others argue that the conflict had a global reach that affected Britain profoundly: its fixation with the 'special relationship' with the United States during the Cold War, for instance, is important in explaining Britain's turbulent relationship with Europe after 1945. On a cultural level too, the Cold War shaped a generation of British fiction, television and film.[11] Britain influenced the course of the Cold War too: its proximity to mainland Europe made it strategically significant, as did its imperial and military spheres of influence and its possession of nuclear weaponry. Britain also had some influence at the United Nations and NATO, albeit less than the US, but significant nonetheless.[12] We might usually ask our students then to consider whether Britain was the 'junior partner' in the Korean War or whether it had influence over its strategy, operations or tactics, either on its own or in collaboration with the other Commonwealth countries who came to form the 1st Commonwealth Division on 28 July 1951.[13]

The relationship with the United States was doubtless another important factor in Britain's Korean War. In December 1950, Attlee stated that 'where the stars and stripes fly in Korea, the British flag will be beside them.'[14] But historians differ on the significance of such statements, particularly as Attlee made this statement during 'crisis' talks in Washington. Peter Hennessy has interpreted Korea as the height of Britain's influence over decision-making in the Cold War, whereas Callum MacDonald highlighted just how uneasy the US response to Chinese intervention in November 1950 made Attlee and his cabinet.[15] There were other more subtle differences between the two nations too. In April 1951 at the Imjin River, as two divisions of Chinese troops bore down on 29 Brigade, British Brigadier Tom Brodie reported to the American Corps headquarters that their situation was 'a bit sticky'. Presuming no situation described as 'sticky' could be that grievous, the Americans did not send sufficient support: the subsequent capture of many men from the 1st Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment highlighted just how much of understatement it had been. For some, this anecdote represents the cultural, as well as political, differences between Britain and the United States and has entered the popular folklore that surrounds the war.[16]

The British Military Experience

British soldiers recall the difficult conditions of the Korean War, particularly in the intensely cold winter of 1950-1951, equipment shortages and the seemingly harsh landscape. But they also later

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[10] Lawrence D. Freedman, "Frostbitten, decoding the Cold War 20 years later," *Foreign Affairs*, 89, 2 (March/April 2010). Emphasis added.

[11] For more on British Cold War culture, see Andrew Hammond, *British Fiction and the Cold War* (Basingstoke, 2013) and Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: the State, Propaganda and Consensus* (London and New York, 2001).

[12] William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: a New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton and Oxford, 2002), p. 129.

[13] For more on the Commonwealth and the Korean War see Jeffrey Grey, *The Commonwealth Armies and the Korean War: an Alliance Study* (Manchester and New York, 1988) and Robert Barnes, 'Branding an aggressor: the Commonwealth, the United Nations and Chinese intervention in the Korean War, November 1950-January 1951', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33, 2 (2010), 231-53.

[14] British Pathé, 'Crisis Talks in Washington', 11 December 1950.

[15] Callum MacDonald, *Britain and the Korean War* (Oxford, 1990), 41-9.

[16] Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (Basingstoke, 2010), p. 313;. Stanley Reynolds, 'Cold comfort war', *Punch,* 30 September 1987, p. 71.

remembered the hardship they saw the Koreans enduring too, the many thousands of refugees they passed on the roads. Yet, though it was unique in many ways, the Korean War was still overshadowed by the Second World War, even at the time. Soldiers wrote about 'the last war' frequently and some younger service personnel saw it as their chance to do something as great as their fathers.[17]

But source material like this requires careful analysis. Service personnel from *all* wars stress the difficulty of speaking and writing about their experiences: the boredom, fear, discomfort and violence of warfare is hard to express, even if people are willing to listen.[18] But historians of Britain's Korean War do have access to 'primary source' material in the form of letters written home, diaries and oral history interviews conducted many years after the war. All these sources offer a different perspective and require different analytical tools but all are attempts by service personnel to make sense of the war and the world around them. Historians of war and conflict increasingly use such 'life-writing' material to tell the histories not simply of what happened on the battlefield, but the outlook of individuals and their sense of themselves as part of the military and even as citizens in the post-1945 world.[19]

Service personnel also wrote histories of the war. Anthony Farrar-Hockley published two official histories of the British role in the early 1990s. Farrar-Hockley was a senior figure in the British military in the late twentieth century and had been the Adjutant of the 1st Battalion, The Gloucestershire Regiment, during its infamous 'stand' at the Imjin River. His detailed narrative history provides a meticulous account of British military actions during the war.[20] Taken captive in Korea in April 1951, Farrar-Hockley also wrote an autobiographical account of his experiences much earlier too and many other service personnel wrote published (and unpublished) memoirs of their experiences.[21] Memoirs such as naval officer Dennis Lankford's *I Defy!* (1954) and chaplain Sam Davies' *In Spite of Dungeons* (1954) remain some of the most compelling British narratives of the war, as do newer publications such as Ethel McNair's *A British Army Nurse in the Korean War* (2007) and Fred Hayhurst's *Green Berets in Korea* (2001).[22] Shortly after the war there was a small burst of fiction-writing about the war too: Simon Kent's novel), *A Hill in Korea* (1954), follows the unfortunate exploits of one patrol largely composed of National Service conscripts and John Holland's searing novel *The Dead, the Dying and the Damned* (1956) was a best-seller. These accounts deeply enrich our understanding of what it felt like to live through the Korean War, but they also tell us something about the way the war was *remembered* after the war; how the memories of the conflict changed over time, even after the war had ended. These publications are therefore 'primary' sources as well for students and teachers of Britain's Korean War.

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[17] *The Wonder Book of the Army* (London, 1954), p. 15.

[18] Yuval Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture 1450-2000* (Basingstoke and New York, 2008).

[19] Diana C. Gill, *How We Are Changed by War: a Study of Letters and Diaries from Colonial Conflicts to Operation Iraqi Freedom* (New York, Abingdon, 2010); Kate McLoughlin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (Cambridge, 2010).

[20] Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War, Volume I: a Distant Obligation* (London, 1990); Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War. Volume II. An Honourable Discharge* (London, 1995).

[21] Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The Edge of the Sword* (London, 1954).

[22] Dennis Lankford, *I Defy! The Story of Lieutenant Dennis Lankford* (London, 1954); Stanley James Davies, *In Spite of Dungeons: the Experiences as a Prisoner-of-war in North Korea of the Chaplain to the First Battalion, the Gloucestershire Regiment* (Stroud, 1992). E.J. McNair, *A British Army Nurse in the Korean War: Shadows of the Far Forgotten* (Stroud, 2007); Fred Hayhurst, *Green Berets in Korea: the Story of 41 Independent Commando Royal Marines* (Cambridge, 2001).

Prisoners of War and the Invention of Brainwashing

Another distinctive element of Britain's Korean War was the experiences of its prisoners of war. Twenty-five Royal Marines were captured in November 1950 at Chosin and eighty officers and other ranks (most Royal Ulster Rifles) were taken in the first Chinese Offensive in January 1951. The largest number of British troops captured took place at Imjin River (527 including Colonel James Power Carne who was awarded the Victoria Cross), and small numbers of others were taken in minor engagements in November 1951. Prisoner of war historians point out that their captivity does not fit with our vision of barbed wire, watch towers and daring escapes, images so prevalent in Second World War films. In fact, many Korean War prisoner of war camps were located in a network of abandoned villages and camps along the Yalu River in the north and distances involved made the possibility of escape very limited. Initially overseen by DPRK forces, China assumed responsibility for POWs in 1951 and ran distinctive 're-education' classes for POWs, calling on them to reconsider their role in this 'senseless' American war.[23] Only one British serviceman defected to China after his imprisonment, Royal Marine Andrew Condron. He later claimed that he wanted to see a Marxist society in action, though he returned to the UK in 1962.[24]

These re-education classes had more far-reaching consequences in Britain and America. In 1950, journalist Edward Hunter first used the term 'brainwashing' (originally a Chinese term, *hsi-nao*) to describe Chinese re-education methods and, though the term was quickly dismissed within the scientific community, it became culturally very popular. Brainwashing became a key element of Cold War films such as *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and *The Ipcress File* (1965), starring Michael Caine. In 1961, the ability of 'turning' someone in captivity was exemplified still further by the imprisonment of former intelligence officer George Blake, who had acted as a Soviet double agent since he had been imprisoned in Korea during the war. Blake later staged a dramatic escape from Wormwood Scrubs prison, fleeing to the Soviet Union. Fascinating as these examples are, cultural historians would point out that they tell us much more about how British and American societies responded generally to Cold War threats, rather than whether brainwashing actually existed or not. We only have to look at its subsequent history to realise that the *term* brainwashing had a long afterlife, regardless of whether it existed or not (and the scientific community was largely sceptical). Historian Kathleen Taylor notes how 'useful' the term has been for politicians and how it has been used since 1950 to describe varying disagreeable or inexplicable views.[25] Brainwashing as *an idea* then is one of the most powerful cultural legacies of the Korean War.

Responses to the Korean War in Britain

As 'brainwashing' shows, people back in Britain responded to the war in a variety of ways. First, came anxiety, even panic. In Mass Observation surveys conducted in the first months of the war,

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[23] Grace Huxford, '"Write your life!": British prisoners of war in the Korean War (1950–1953) and enforced life narratives', *Life Writing,* 12, 1 (2015), 3-23.

[24] S.P. Mackenzie, 'The individualist collaborator: Andy Condron in Korea and China, 1950-62', *War and Society,* 30:2 (2011), 163-65.

[25] Kathleen Taylor, *Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

people describe being 'frightened' and worrying what will happen to their families.[26] Some of this concern came from memories of Second World War bombing of urban areas and some people considered rebuilding their air-raid shelters. But after the initial worries and the dramatic events of the first year of the war, Korea became less visible in the press and in people's memories of the early 1950s. By the end of the war, one news report argued that England's cricket victory in the Ashes had was more celebrated than returning troops.[27] As British troops became more static in the second half of the war attention lessened, not helped by the inconclusive end of the war and continued division of Korea.

But not everyone was apathetic about the war. Members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) expressed their opposition to the war fiercely in their publications and through various peace and 'friendship' organisations. Politicians from within the Labour Party too called for an end to hostilities: Monica Felton, Chairman of the Stevenage Development Corporation, was sacked from her position for visiting North Korea on a sponsored visit. Elsewhere, the 'Red Dean of Canterbury' Hewlett Johnson (1874-1966) and the scientist Joseph Needham (1900-95) alleged that the United States Air Force had conducted a 'germ' warfare campaign in northern China. Some of these figures were dismissed as eccentric, but some newspapers called them traitors and lobbied for them to be tried in court as such. For historians of anti-war protest, the Korean War marks an important early episode in anti-nuclear protest, which hit the headlines later in the decade with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND)'s first Aldermaston march in spring 1958.[28]

Remembering the Forgotten War

But if the Korean War was so controversial, why was it forgotten? Some of the reasons lie in its unclear aims, the nature of the fighting and the outcome of the war itself. The shadow cast by the Second World War also meant that Korea failed to attain a distinct place within British and memorial popular culture. Charles S. Young suggests that the story of the Korean War also fails to fit within a 'usable past', unlike the Second World War or the much-criticised Vietnam War.[29] However, we can also ask if the Korean War is *still* forgotten in the same way in Britain: it features in major museums of war and conflict, its new memorial on the Victoria Embankment opened in 2014, and the war is even mentioned in television programmes such as *Call the Midwife*. As this publication demonstrates, it is also taught widely in secondary schools. The history of the Korean War in Britain must therefore address the changing significance and remembrance of the war in the twenty-first century, even as the generation who served in the war pass away. The war might, in short, be forgotten no longer.

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[26] Mass Observation was a social survey that ran from 1937 to the early 1950s, observing and recording personal writing, conversation and behaviour in Britain. For more information see www.massobs.org.uk.

[27] 'The war which was forgotten in excitement of the Test Match', *Bury Free Press*, 31 July 1953, p. 1.

[28] Kate Hudson, *CND – Now More than Ever: the Story of a Peace Movement* (London, 2005), pp. 32 and 61.

[29] Charles S. Young, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number: Exploiting Korean War POWs at Home and Abroad* (New York, 2014), p. 180.