



The Korean War and its Legacy

HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2019

Online course, Week 5: The British military experience in the Korean War

The Fellows this week were fully immersed in the actual battlefield events and actions, specifically the experience of the British soldiers. With help from podcasts and articles by Dr Grace Huxford they threw themselves into the events, with some fascinating outcomes.

There were certainly plenty of instances of the Korean War being a negative experience for the British troops:

- *The palpable feeling linked to the British military experience of the Korean War is one of bewilderment. British military personnel seemed to variously have no desire to be in Korea, were unsure what they were doing there, were unprepared for what they encountered and found their experience miserable. Obviously all of the above can and are the experiences of military personnel in many/most wars but in this instance the lack of purpose/engagement with this conflict seems particularly strong.*

Some explored this negativity or alienation in greater depth and found that it was situated in some very complex and conflicting contexts:

- *I found Grace Huxford's work on 'Men of the World' or 'Uniformed Boys' absolutely fascinating, particularly her arguments about how Cold War politics contributed to notions of gender ideals. It seems that the young 19-21-year-old national servicemen in particular saw themselves in a somewhat ambiguous way; wanting to prove themselves in a traditional masculine way but also feeling that their military contribution was very much dwarfed by that of their fathers in the Second World War. Huxford uses a variety of sources including a battlefield questionnaire to assess how servicemen viewed their experiences in Korea and comes to the conclusion that British servicemen underplayed their contribution when comparing it to the role played by their fathers in the Second World War and that the 'Second World War was used as a measure of masculinity against which their own experiences in Korea were measured, not altogether favourably'.*

Another theme which interested the Fellows was the whole experience of British Prisoners of War (POWs):

- *Huxford mentions in the podcast how a defining feature of British accounts from the conflict is that of surprise regarding the Chinese attitude to POWs. Many of the British who found themselves captured during Korean War, particularly those who had met the same fate in German camps during WW2, found the Chinese focus on ideology in complete contrast to the German focus on gaining tactical information from POWs. The physical nature of camps themselves were also different, with many Chinese camps in such an isolated position that they didn't have the need for barbed wire or other fencing to keep prisoners from escaping. It seems that many British POWs were determined to avoid falling into the category of 'progressive' (Communist) or 'reactionary' (anti-Communist) in the Chinese camps' educational programmes, and this supports the issue raised in John's post that many British remained ambivalent towards the ideological differences in the Korean War.*

Several Fellows were fascinated by the source material available, particularly the 'forced narratives' which POWs were forced to write while in captivity and which were part of the attempts by the Chinese Communists to 're-educate' the British POWs:

- *In the article, Huxford highlights the potential problems in using interviews of POWs with the idea of an 'enforced narrative' that directs prisoners' accounts of their time in captivity. The prisoners' concept of time is also explored in relation to examining their place and role in the conflict. Huxford makes a comparison with photos from WW1: as the war drew on, fewer photos directly displayed the date, perhaps indicating fatigue or a lack of concern for the progress of the war. This is reflected in the case of some British prisoners of war such as John Shaw (p.12) who marked time by the changing colours of the Yalu River, supporting the idea that measuring time was itself embedded with a sense of involvement (or lack thereof) in the conflict. The Chinese-issued diaries, too, took advantage of this concept, leaving a date open for the Korean Armistice which it more or less put in the hands of the powerless prisoners who could 'make it soon by speaking up for peace'.*
- *Grace Huxford's article 'Write your Life' certainly challenged me, as I tried to focus on the history but kept getting sucked into the psychology. I simplified her work into two types of life-telling narratives: voluntary texts that are self-motivated and enforced narratives. Her focus is definitely on the pitfalls of the enforced narrative, but she qualified that an enforced narrative was not necessarily less authentic than a voluntary text as the historian must consider what would motivate someone to tell their life story voluntarily. In her podcast for the HA, Huxford suggests that testimonies are brilliant to give you the individual experiences of battle, the violence, friendship and even gender roles but that veterans struggle to narrate for an audience that does not understand war and that for many the experience is too traumatic to recollect. We also fall prey to using a modern context to judge experiences; however, Huxford argues that this in itself is valuable to understand HOW war is remembered through history.*

Core resources

- [Grace Huxford podcast for HA web site: The British Military in the Korean War](#)
- Imperial War Museum Voices of the Korean War <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-korean-war>
- Korean War Veterans website www.kwvdm.org and www.koreanwarlegacy.org
- Grace Huxford, "Write Your Life!" British Prisoners of War in the Korean War and Enforced Life Narratives', *Life Writing*, 12, 1 (March, 2015). 2 – 23

Secondary sources

- Grace Huxford, “Men of the World” or “Uniformed Boys”? Hegemonic Masculinity in the British Army in the Era of the Korean War’, in Philip Muehlenbeck (ed.), Gender, Sexuality and the Cold War: a Global Perspective (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2017), pp. 251-269.

Primary sources

- Korean War Veterans Digital Memorial www.kwvdm.org; and www.koreanwarlegacy.org
- National Archives (UK) <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/battles/korea/>
- Newsreel, British Pathé, 1950: <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/more-british-in-korea/query/korean+war+british>
- Imperial War Museum, Oral History interview, 1987, with Andrew Condron, the one British prisoner of war who opted to go to China at the end of the Korean War - <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80009479> The IWM contains many other interviews too with former service personnel who served in the Korean War, including those who recall their experiences of the Battle of Imjin: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-korean-war>
- UK National Archives, Online Exhibition on Battle of the Imjin, including files from governmental archives: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/battles/korea/battle.htm>
- Imperial War Museum, 25 photographs of the Korean War: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/25-photographs-of-the-korean-war>