

# Tea, Toast and Totalism Transcript

## **Tea, Toast and Totalism Transcript**

**Speaker 1:** Hello and welcome to Tea, Toast and Totalism, a podcast about the British Perspective on the brainwashing of UN soldiers during the Korean War. We are Lily

**Speaker 3 :** Tom

**Speaker 2 :** and Alexander

**Speaker 1 :** And we are history undergraduates at the university of York. We were tasked with producing a podcast designed to update teachers like yourselves on recent historical scholarship. In this podcast, we aim to explore the debate on whether brainwashing is an appropriate term to describe what happened during the Korean War.

**Speaker 1 :** We will focus on the British perspective in order to diversify the curricula which focuses predominantly on the United States.

**Speaker 1 :** This podcast provides you with the context, historiography and introduces the academic debate for you to take into the classroom and encourage your student to think critically about the wider impacts of historical events.

**Speaker 1 :** First, let's set the scene.

### **[Marching]**

**Speaker 2 :** It's the 25th of June, 1950, and North Korean troops backed by the Soviet Union have just marched into South Korea.

**Speaker 2 :** Fearing the spread of communism, a UN force under the leadership of famed US general Douglas MacArthur is sent to support the struggling South.

**Speaker 2 :** 60,000 British troops are also sent to fight in what will become its biggest engagement since the Second World War. The British force suffered approximately 1,100 deaths and 2,600 casualties, including 1,060 prisoners of war.

### **[Tank sounds]**

**Speaker 2:** In its most dramatic engagement, the British 29th Brigade under Thomas Brodie faced a Chinese onslaught aimed at Seoul in the Battle of the Imjin River from the 22nd to the 25th of April 1951.

**Speaker 2 :** Standing in between waves of Chinese soldiers and the South Korean capital, lacking air and tank support, the entrenched and embattled British forces fought a bitter defensive action on the Imjin.

**Speaker 2 :** With tank support, of the 8th Hussars finally arriving in force by the 25th of April, the 29th Brigade were able to pull back after suffering huge casualties.

**Speaker 2 :** The Battle of the Imjin River was critical in preventing the success of the Chinese offensive towards Seoul.

**Speaker 2 :** However, Britain paid heavily for this and more than half of the 1st Gloucestershire Battalion were captured, plunged into the harsh reality of Chinese prisoner of war camps.

**Speaker 1 :** So, what can you tell us about the experience of British soldiers in the prisoner of war camps?

**Speaker 2 :** Whilst both sides used prisons of war camps, the camps of communist forces have left a brutal legacy in the imagination of the British people.

**Speaker 2 :** Most infamously in the western mind, the death marches. Captured UN soldiers and western missionaries were forced to march to prisoner war camps in horrific conditions.

**Speaker 2 :** If they survived these marches, prisoners were subjected to starvation, solitary confinement, and general mistreatment at the hands of their captives.

**Speaker 2 :** In these camps, the Chinese undertook an extensive program of re-education to force them to abandon their so-called imperialist ideas for Maoism.

**Speaker 2 :** Rumors of their coercive scientific methods employed by the Chinese spread throughout Western societies, leading to paranoia over widespread communist 'brainwashing'.

**Speaker 1 :** That leads us onto the main focus of this podcast. To what extent can we consider 'brainwashing' an appropriate term to describe what happened in the prisoner war camps during the Korean War?

**Speaker 1 :** Before we dive into this, what is the meaning and the origins of the term 'brainwashing'?

**Speaker 3 :** So actually the term is loosely defined, and was largely rejected by contemporary psychologists such as Robert Lifton in his book 'Thought Reform and the psychology of totalism: A study of brainwashing in China'.

**Speaker 3 :** However, a definition that most agree on is the forcible indoctrination of beliefs and ideas, in this context political ideas.

**Speaker 3 :** The term originated within the American press and was adopted in Britain as fear spread among liberal democracies of the reemergence of Nazism in Germany.

**Speaker 3 :** However, as the Cold War raged on, these fears were increasingly eclipsed by worries about Stalinism and Maoism and therefore the rise of communism, which was at the time known as totalitarianism.

**Speaker 3 :** This was reflected in films such as *The Manchurian Candidate* starring Frank Sinatra, which was released in 1962.

**Speaker 3 :** Whilst that gives us an insight into the contemporary perspective, what are the more recent developments in the study of brainwashing?

**Speaker 1 :** 2018 research project 'Hidden persuaders' involving a team of historians and psychologist such as Sarah Marks and Daniek Pick argued that the story of brainwashing is a dangerous modern science fueled by rumors of experimental and anti-communist policies which were formed in the 1950s based on stories from prison of war camps.

**Speaker 1 :** They suggest that the term 'brainwashing' was a product of the political agendas of western governments.

**Speaker 1 :** Brainwashing became household news on both sides of the Atlantic when in 1953, with the Korean War just over. 21 American GIs and one British prisoner of war made the decision not to return home, but to defect to communist China.

**Speaker 1 :** Two perspectives which gives us contrasting insights into the prisoner of war experience of brainwashing are the testimonies of Harry Hawksworth and Andrew Codron. Two British soldiers captured during the Korean War.

**Speaker 1 :** Both were subject to political indoctrination however give different conclusions on alleged use of brainwashing in these Chinese operated camps.

**Speaker 2 :** Firstly, Harry Hawksworth of the first Glostershire Regiment. He was captured by the Chinese at Imjin River and 65 years later still expressed fear at the memory of being taken prisoner.

**Speaker 2 :** Hawksworth recounted being marched at night for 6 weeks non-stop to Camp Changsong on the Korean Manchurian border.

**Speaker 2 :** Whilst there, he was refused access to the Red Cross packages, a violation of the Geneva convention, denying him basic necessities such as food, hygiene products and tobacco.

**Speaker 2 :** He recalls the brutal system by which escapes were punished, as the guards would give solitary confinement based on how far you got.

**Speaker 2 :** Hawksworth himself escaped getting 20 miles away and got a week in solitary confinement with no access to sunlight.

**Speaker 2 :** He describes how Chinese tried to convert prisoners of war through brainwashing. However he does not specify any particular method.

**Speaker 1 :** So, what happened to the only British serviceman to refuse repatriation at the end of the Korean war?

**Speaker 3 :** Andrew Condrón's testimony offers a different story to Hawksworth. Condrón was a Royal Marine who was reported missing on the 29th of November 1950. Captured by North Korean forces at the Chosin Reservoir.

**Speaker 3 :** From 1950 till 53 he was imprisoned in Camp 10 at Chonma and Camp 5 Pyuktong, North Korea. Condrón refused to be repatriated after the armistice, choosing instead to defect to the People's Republic of China, where he lived from 1953 until 1962.

**Speaker 3 :** He claimed to have made this decision after his Chinese captives had convinced him that the US had made use of illegal germ warfare during the war.

**Speaker 3 :** As a result of this Chinese propaganda coup, the British Foreign Office was concerned to know "the state of Condrón's mind" with a view of persuading him to return to the west.

**Speaker 3 :** He would eventually return to the UK with his wife in 1962.

**Speaker 3 :** On a different note, according to the Foreign Office, the only positive thing to come out of Condrón's experience was that "his Glasgow accent seems to have vanished".

**Speaker 1 :** So what does a comparison of these accounts reveal about the use of brainwashing in prisoner of war camps? Can we say this was brainwashing?

**Speaker 2 :** Well, on one hand Hawksworth claims that brainwashing did happen. However, he doesn't go into detail about what these brainwashing techniques entailed.

**Speaker 2 :** This leaves some ambiguity over whether the brainwashing described by Hawksworth was a scientific kind portrayed in the Manchurian Candidate or merely an attempt by communist forces to make prisoners defect through the use of regular coercive methods.

**Speaker 3 :** On the other hand, Condrón claims that he personally overcame attempts at brainwashing and that he defected of his own free will based on Chinese anti-American propaganda about germ warfare. Which in a way means that the 'brainwashing' was partially successful as it turned him away from the west until his return in 1962.

**Speaker 3 :** This reflects the argument made by the Hidden Persuaders project as it claims that brainwashing is a problematic term because it overlooks individual agency.

**Speaker 3 :** Condrón states that he was acting autonomously and made the positive decision to defect to China. This was also true of the 21 American GIs who chose to defect, many of whom also claim to have acted of their own volition.

**Speaker 3 :** For example, David Hawkins, the youngest of the GIs, cited a desire to escape a past of childhood trauma and familial issues, while Clarence Adams, an African-American, pointed to his experience of racism in the United States.

**Speaker 1 :** So why is the 'brainwashing' narrative so dominant in Britain? What factors have impacted this?

**Speaker 3 :** Well, the British government definitely played a role in shaping the narrative. For example, they adopted a policy of not promoting Korean War veterans to high ranks within the British armed forces. This was due to fears and pressures about them potentially being brainwashed communist agents capable of gaining access to protect information.

**Speaker 2 :** This actually fed into public anxieties about brainwashing. Like historian Grace Huxford argues in her 2018 book, 'The Korean War in Britain', the concept of brainwashing made people fundamentally rethink their relationship with the state.

**Speaker 2 :** If communist countries were capable of brainwashing people, then who was to say Western countries could not brainwash their own citizens into blind support for capitalism?

**Speaker 2 :** Some people even feared their washing machines could be used to brainwash them. Clothes weren't the only thing they were spinning.

**Speaker 1 :** Government policies and public anxieties were reflected in contemporary pop culture. As previously mentioned, anti-communist films like the Manchurian Candidate, a comment on McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare in the 1950s reflect American fears over government infiltration by brainwashed veterans of the Korean War.

**Speaker 1 :** However, Huxford argues that the film was not as popular in Britain as it was in the US.

**Speaker 1 :** But what was the reason for this?

**Speaker 3 :** She argues that instead, Second World War films were far more popular in Britain. The British public spent more time remembering their victory in World War Two than worrying about the containment of communism halfway across the world.

**Speaker 3 :** This suggests that brainwashing narrative was less dominant in Britain than in the US.

**Speaker 3 :** However Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony' offers an alternate perspective. In our context, this refers to the way the government can control the working class and through culture and ideology, establishing their agenda through media and pop culture as common sense, which are then accepted by society as the norm.

**Speaker 3 :** But how does this link to the brainwashing narrative post Korean war?

**Speaker 3:** Well, linking back to the point about the Manchurian Candidate, it demonstrates how pop culture can reinforce the government's policy surrounding returning veterans.

**Speaker 3 :** This also links to the argument of Marks and Pick that humans are influenced by complex social factors. Therefore, the idea of brainwashing has been influenced by a vast network of different agendas and narratives in post-war years.

**Speaker 1 :** Are there any other problems with this narrative of brainwashing?

**Speaker 2 :** Well, The Manchurian Candidate definitely has racist undertones. The movie is very much a reflection of attitudes towards East Asian people in the early 1960s. It is strongly implied that the Chinese performed a form of orientalist science on the American prisoners of war.

**Speaker 2 :** Huxford supports the idea that a lot of the fears over brainwashing are part of a broader culture of orientalism in Britain.

**Speaker 2 :** It certainly seems like a lot of attitudes towards Chinese science were based on radicalised ideas about Chinese culture.

**Speaker 1 :** So, to conclude. Can we consider what happened in the camps during the Korean war 'brainwashing'?

**Speaker 1 :** The question of whether brainwashing genuinely took place during the Korean War is widely contested.

**Speaker 1 :** The testimonies of British prisoners of war like Harry Hawksworth and Andrew Condron show us just how varied individual experiences could be, ranging from accounts of coercive reeducation to claims of personal agency despite exposure to Chinese anti-American propaganda.

**Speaker 1 :** These contrasting accounts show that there was no single uniform prisoner of war experience, and therefore no straightforward conclusion about the use of brainwashing.

**Speaker 1:** What our exploration has shown is that the power of the 'brainwashing' narrative lies not only in what happened in the camps but how governments, the public, the media and contemporary psychologists choose to interpret those events and therefore provides a useful insight into the wider ideological context of the Cold War.

**Speaker 1 :** Political agendas and social anxieties all shape the emergence of 'brainwashing' as a compelling and often convenient concept. Placing these ideas in their historical setting reminds us that concepts like 'thought reform' or the 'brainwashing subject' were never neutral.

**Speaker 1 :** The term 'brainwashing' was coined at a moment of profound ideological tension when western societies were grappling with what totalitarianism meant, how persuasion worked, and how much control states could hold over the mind.

**Speaker 1 :** But there are clearly problems with using the term.

**Speaker 1 :** For example, as historians and psychologists such as Marks, Pick and Huxford have argued, the term often obscures the complicated social, political and psychological forces that influence human behaviour.

**Speaker 1 :** People are never just robots. Human beings cannot be understood through simplistic narratives of total manipulation.

**Speaker 1 :** Therefore using the term, 'brainwashing', is arguably not appropriate to describe what happened in the prisoner of war camps during the Korean War, as it risks undermining a person's agency by portraying them as a passive victim rather than someone shaped by their own choices and circumstances.

**Speaker 1 :** Thank you for listening. This has been Lily

**Speaker 3 :** Tom

**Speaker 2 :** and Alexander

**Speaker 1 :** in our podcast, Tea, Toast and Totalism in partnership with the Historical Association.

**Speaker 1 :** And remember, be careful the next time you walk past your washing machine.