



# The Korean War and its Legacy

HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2019

## Online course, Week 3

### British involvement in the Korean War

Week 3 of the online programme focused on the decision by Britain to take part in the UNO coalition and what this revealed about Britain's aims and positions and of course the relationship between Britain and the USA.

One major theme emerging was the desire of Britain to be at the centre of things in the hope that the British could use that position to influence the USA and perhaps further its own interests in doing so. However, it is not the case that Britain followed the US lead blithely or blindly:

- *Britain initially wanted to keep on good terms with China and believed they could wean China away from Soviet influence. Atlee stated; 'handled properly 'might become an important counterpoise to Russia in Asia and the Far East' (from Dockrill article). Truman, on the other hand, under Republican pressure to prove himself after the 'loss of China' was determined to show his anti-Communist credentials and from the outset widened the conflict declaring that the 'neutralization of the Straits of Formosa' was in the best interests of the United States, sending the US navy into the Taiwan Strait to support Chiang Kai-Shek, effectively putting Taiwan under American protection. This brought the US into conflict with the UK as throughout the initial year of the war, Britain believed it could negotiate with China to help resolve the conflict in Korea quickly in return for allowing China into the UN and meeting Chinese interests in Taiwan. 'Britain's continued pressure on the United States to adopt a less rigid attitude towards communist China angered Washington, and caused frequent friction between the two countries' (Dockrill).*

There were also some interesting and potentially controversial views aired as well, particularly over the issue of British and US attitudes towards China:

- *It seems very nice to think that Britain was trying to be this adult, moderating influence over the more impulsive Americans – but it had that luxury in Korea as it had very little 'skin in the game'. What if China had tried to send troops into Hong Kong in violation of treaty? Would the British have been as keen to be a mediator in that context? Or would the British have wanted Hong Kong treated (and I borrow this analogy from Chi-Kwan Mark again) as a Far-Eastern Berlin, with the implications for wider conflict that would have involved?*

... but also over where this was a late example of an imperial adventure:

- *I have to be honest, I found reading the sources quite frustrating as they take a stance to historical investigation I have issues with. Each of these historians is clearly conveying their use of a considerable number of primary sources, which clearly is the case. But one*

*cannot help but question 'how' the historians have used their sources and what they have focused on. All are suggesting Britain is motivated by National Interest, but is there meaningful engagement with what's underpinning this; the desire to remain an Imperial power?... So why does Britain intervene in the Korean War? Well why would it not given how it sees its place in the world in 1950! Personally, I would be much more moved reading an article coming from that perspective and I don't doubt the same sources as those utilised by the scholars here could be used to construct it.*

Finally, several Fellows have started thinking ahead to the final stage of this programme, in which they have to write a classroom resource:

- *Following on from the theme of a 'forgotten war', it seems that most schools (certainly previous Exam Specifications for Edexcel for example) put the Korean War in modules concerning US Policy in Asia and many students do not realise fully Britain's involvement. The topic may give students opportunities to look at veterans in local areas and provoke considerations of why so few are aware of British soldiers' experiences unlike WW1 and 2, and also why so little seems to be happening in terms of commemorating 70 years since the outbreak of the war. It may be worth contacting museums e.g. Imperial War Museum of the North to see if they are considering doing anything.*

### Core resources

- Dockrill, The Foreign Office, Anglo-American Relations and the Korean War, June 1950-June 1951 *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* Vol. 62, No. 3 (Summer, 1986), pp. 459-476
- William Stueck, *The Limits of Influence: British Policy and American Expansion of the War in Korea*, 1986

### Secondary sources

- Geoffrey Warner (2011), Anglo-American Relations and the Cold War in 1950, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 22:1, 44-60
- Peter Lowe, An Ally and a Recalcitrant General: Great Britain, Douglas MacArthur and the Korean War, 1950-1, *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 105, No. 416 (Jul., 1990), pp. 624-653
- Michael Hopkins, The Price of Cold War Partnership: Sir Oliver Franks and the British Military Commitment in the Korean War, *Cold War History* 2001 pp.28-46
- Kevin Ruane & James Ellison, *Managing the Americans: Anthony Eden, Harold Macmillan and the Pursuit of 'Power-by-Proxy' in the 1950s* 2004

### Primary sources

- Churchill Archive: What does the Korean War reveal about the Special Relationship?  
<http://www.churchillarchiveforschools.com/themes/the-themes/anglo-american-relations/what-does-the-korean-war-reveal-about-the-special-relationship/the-sources>
- UK Cabinet Papers  
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/themes/korean-war.htm>
- Extract from Hansard, 26 June 1950:  
[https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1950/jun/26/korean-republic-invasion#S5CV0476P0\\_19500626\\_HOC\\_264](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1950/jun/26/korean-republic-invasion#S5CV0476P0_19500626_HOC_264)
- British Pathe newsreel  
<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/VLVAACLXV37H594NR1EFH77S81CRV5-PM-ATLEE-SPEAKS-AT-NATIONAL-PRESS-CLUB-IN-USA-AT-ONSET-OF>