



The Korean War and its Legacy

HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2019

Online course, Week 7: A Forgotten War?

In the discussions so far it has become clear that there is a very strong perception among veterans that the Korean War has become a forgotten war. This week the Fellows explored some readings on this issue.

There does seem to be a fairly high degree of historical amnesia regarding the Korean War:

- *Huxford's article makes a compelling case as to why the Korean War is largely forgotten in Britain by arguing it has not proved serviceable for the purposes of national identity formation/entrenchment. Framings linked to WW2 such as the 'underdog' triumphing over 'evil' don't work in relation to a conflict, where Britain was a junior partner and whose aims, methods and outcomes had been at best unclear, at worst criticised.*
- *Huxford reveals how the veterans themselves have also contributed to Korea as a forgotten war. At the time the soldiers felt in the shadows of their fathers whose sacrifice had been so much greater, the Second World War therefore acted as a yardstick that meant their efforts fell short. Huxford also explains how the veterans subsequently took on the mantle of Korea as forgotten; either as something that they could rail against or as a way of marking their war out, what gave it its special significance, something that give the veterans their unique identity.*
- *As I said in my post last week, when reading or hearing about the horrific and painful memories that the veterans have to tell about Korea (this week more harrowing accounts in the documentary on Scottish soldiers) this again all points to the importance of unearthing the forgotten voices as almost a political act, highlighting those excluded from a historical narrative and working to actively 'rescue' historical subjects from obscurity.*
- *Huxford also raises the argument originating from Freud, that forgetting can be a destructive, deliberate act. While I agree that the British experience of the Korean War did not fit the British 'narrative' of national identity in the 1950s, it seems to me more likely that Britain was only just coming to terms with celebrating its role in WW2. As such, the Korean War was naturally overshadowed (a little bit of detail from Ian Kershaw's Rollercoaster: Europe 1950-2017 [here](#)). Over 100 war films were produced in Britain from 1945-1960, with 8.5 million seeing The Dambusters (1955) and 12 million seeing Bridge over the River Kwai (1957). Churchill's six-volume The Second World War was published from 1948-53 and more or less established the authoritative interpretation of Britain's role in WW2 (a triumphant one) at that time. Conversely, there was little engagement in the academic history of the Second World War apart from Hugh Trevor Roper and A.J.P. Taylor. After the devastation caused by the 'people's war' in Britain, the nation was unlikely to have cultural space for a conflict in a far away and foreign land.*

On the other hand there would seem to be a reasonably strong consensus that academic historians appreciate the importance of the Korean War:

- *Huxford's article touches on some areas we have previously addressed, earlier in the course, such as the work historians have done on the significance of the Korean War for the US/UK relationship and Britain's Cold War strategy, which in itself supports the Barnes position that it is no longer forgotten by the academic community. Obviously other Cold War historians focus on its significance in intensifying the conflict in the East Asia region and also entrenching the military industrial complex in the US through the acceptance of NSC 68, which has a lasting legacy.*

Core resources

- BBC Scotland – Scotland's Forgotten War in Korea
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtCw5Fc65jQ>
- Grace Huxford, 'The Korean War Never Happened', *Twentieth Century British History*, journal article

Secondary sources

- C-Span interview with Dr Han on the Korean War Veterans Archive
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?314179-1/korean-war-digital-memorial-foundation>
- Saying Thank you to the Korean War veterans
https://www.syracuse.com/kirst/2011/11/post_216.html
- Interpreting the Korean War Review Article Philip West 1989
- Russian Historiography of the Korean War
<https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/02/13/99697/>
- Grace Huxford, 'State Power, Cultural Exchange and the "Forgotten War": British Veterans of the Korean War, 1953-2013', in Ángel Alcalde and Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas (ed.), *War Veterans and the World after 1945: Social Movements, Cold War Politics and Decolonization* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 219-234.