

Thinking Soldiers: British Servicemen in the Korean War and Limits of State-Directed Subjectivity

My paper today explores the application of a particular model of subjectivity, as directed by ‘the state’, to a specific historical period and charts the limitations in doing so. The main assumption underpinning this paper is by now quite familiar to historians: the idea that the self, far from a trans-historical certainty, is ‘constructed’ within particular parameters, changing according to context.¹ Whilst historians and social scientists vociferously debate the mechanisms, structures and spaces of selfhood, rarely, I would argue, is the premise of historically contingent selfhood challenged.

Yet behind this apparent consensus on selfhood, important questions remain. This paper addresses one of the most contentious problems: that of *agency*. Do some of the most widely-referenced models of centrally-imposed selfhood allow for negotiation, irrationality or the possibility of independent thought? This question was powerfully brought home to me during my own doctoral research into British servicemen in the Korean War (1950-1953). Writing in the immediate wake of the Korean War ex-Royal Marine and former prisoner of war Andrew Condon noted in a book entitled *Thinking Soldiers* (1955) that:

...the soldier today can no longer be viewed as a robot. The more different kinds of experience he has, the more he fits them together in his mind. That is why all those who consider the soldier merely as a thing to be used, like the rifle he carries or the pack he wears, are bound to come out very badly in their calculations. Our experience, and that of the men who wrote this book, included battle, capture and much thought in Korea. We were a few among many thousands.²

¹ Anthony Elliott, *Concepts of the Self* (2nd Edition), (Cambridge and Malden MA, 2008), p. 15; Leonard Smith similarly notes that historians are no longer surprised by the notion that autobiography and a sense of self produce *each* other, see Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War*, (Ithaca; London, 2007), pp. 7 -8.

² Andrew M. Condon, Richard G. Corden and Sgt. Larance V. Sullivan (eds.), *Thinking Soldiers by Men Who Fought in Korea*, (Peking, 1955), pp. 1-2.

Condron was the only British servicemen to opt to remain in Chinese custody at the end of the Korean War and the piece he wrote with two other former prisoners in 1955 is a political and personal justification of their defection. Yet beneath this rhetoric, his declaration exemplifies the state's formative role in shaping subjectivity in the Cold War period. My paper today considers this relationship. I argue firstly that the construction, control and efficiency of human subjects, and of the soldier in particular, were key concerns to all combatant nations to some extent. In their studies of life-writing, Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck highlight state interest in subjectivity in Soviet Russia, but I argue that such an interpretation should be extended to other contexts.³ From the psychological assessment of new recruits to the interrogation of returned POWs, British authorities repeatedly projected their ideal models of military subjects. In arguing this, I am referencing a particularly influential body of work on the construction of subjectivity which began in the late 1980s. This corpus includes work by Nicholas Rose, Anthony Giddens and Mike Savage and considers the dominant influence of the *state* (in these works defined as a set of regulatory and organisational practices) in creating *subjects*.

Yet Condron and his fellow prisoners of war were also introduced to new ways of perceiving themselves both as soldiers and as citizens. Through the extensive political education and the unique, unparalleled use of life-writing in Chinese-run prison camps in the Korean War, some servicemen questioned their previous soldierly identities, with potentially destabilizing consequences. Prisoners of war had to confront allegations of 'brainwashing' upon their return home. The term 'brainwashing' itself, I argue, represents a hitherto overlooked component in the history of subjectivity in the latter half of the twentieth century. This paper will explore the limits of state-directed subjectivity in Cold War Britain, arguing the Korean War represented an unsettling, if brief, episode in the construction of the post-war democratic self.

³ Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial*, (Cambridge MA and London, 2003); Igal Halfin, 'Looking into the Oppositionists' Souls: Inquisition Communist Style', *Russian Review*, 60, 3 (Jul., 2001), pp. 316-339; Jochen Hellbeck, 'Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: the Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931-9', in Fitzpatrick, Sheila (ed.), *Stalinism: New Directions*, (London and New York, 2000), pp. 77-116; Jochen Hellbeck, 'Working, Struggling, Becoming: Stalin-Era Autobiographical Texts', *Russian Review*, 60, 3 (Jul., 2001), pp. 340-359.

Firstly, some background to the Korean War is helpful. Korea was occupied by the Japanese from 1911 to 1945 and, following the Second World War, two politically divergent regimes developed either side of the 38th Parallel, backed by the USSR and USA respectively. Communist North Korea invaded South Korea on 25 June 1950 and twenty four nations offered armed or humanitarian support to South Korea and to a US-led United Nations (UN) force. By the end of 1950, China had entered the war to support North Korea and had pushed back the initial UN advance. The first year of the conflict was marked by the rapid movement of troops up and down the peninsula, with the city of Seoul changing hands frequently. The remaining two years were defined by more static and even trench warfare around the 38th Parallel as peace negotiations stretched out, seemingly indeterminably.⁴

British involvement further complicates this narrative. A range of motives arguably influenced Clement Attlee's government's decision to commit British forces to the UN mission in Korea. The standard explanations are that Britain wished to support the ideas of collective security through the United Nations and to offer America assistance to ensure their continued aid to post-war Europe.⁵ Sean Greenwood, however, argues that Britain also hoped to soften America's potentially insensitive policy in Korea and towards the Chinese People's Republic. Britain also had its own international concerns in the early 1950s.⁶ The British Army was fighting in Malaya, Kenya, Singapore and increasingly around the Suez Canal region.⁷ The British role in Korea was therefore highly complex, complicated by Britain's own struggles in the context of decolonisation. The British servicemen themselves were also far from homogenous. The British Army units stationed in Korea were an ever-changing mix of army regulars, young National Servicemen, reservists from the Second World War and K-Force volunteers. How then are we to interpret the subjectivity of this group of men and indeed, why did subjectivity *matter* in this context?

⁴ Key Korean War chronologies include: Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War: Volume I A Distant Obligation*, (London, 1990); Peter Lowe, *The Korean War*, (New York, 2000); Callum Macdonald, *Britain and the Korean War*, (Oxford and Cambridge MA, 1990). Popular histories include: Max Hastings, *The Korean War*, (London, 2010); Andrew Salmon, *To the Last Round: The Epic British Stand on the Imjin River, Korea 1951*, (London, 2009).

⁵ Macdonald, *Britain and the Korean War*, pp. 27-28.

⁶ Sean Greenwood, "'A War We Don't Want': Another Look at the British Labour Government's Commitment in Korea 1950-51', *Contemporary British History*, 17, 4 (Winter 2003), pp. 1-24.

⁷ National Army Museum, *Project Korea: the British Soldier in Korea 1950-1953*, (London, 1988, p. 8.

To answer these questions we must return in more detail to the relationship between state and subjectivity. John Meyer writes that the ‘concern to construct individuals in a way appropriate to society’s needs is as intrinsic a component of the modern social structure as are large-scale economies and bureaucratic states.’⁸ As sociologist Anthony Giddens notes, this is not to presume that ‘the cultivation of individual potentialities’ has not been a concern of all societies to some extent but that the control and even creation of subjects is particularly integral to *modern* (predominately twentieth-century) systems of power.⁹ Giddens argues that privileged position of experts, from doctors to engineers, ratifies certain systems of knowledge, which in turn become embedded within modern society as ‘common sense’.¹⁰ Such knowledge systems in turn, Giddens and Meyer imply, fundamentally influence how individuals perceive themselves.¹¹ Consequently, according to such arguments the individual is both moulded by the mechanisms of the modern state and is crucial component within its structure. As Nicholas Rose and Peter Miller summarise, the ‘mental lives of citizens, their emotions, capacities and propensities’ form both a building block and an observable variable of state control.¹²

Some scholars argue that the second half of the twentieth century saw the modern, Western state increase this type of interest in its subjects. Nicholas Rose uses Michel Foucault’s concept of a genealogy of selfhood together with neo-Marxist Louis Althusser’s idea of ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ to develop his own theory of state-directed subjectivity.¹³ Rose argues the protrusion of psychological disciplines into people’s lives, through psychiatry and therapy but also through more

⁸ John W Meyer, ‘Myths of Socialization and of Personality’, in Thomas C. Heller et al. (eds.), *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, (Stanford, 1986), p. 208.

⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, (Cambridge, 1991), p.75.

¹⁰ Categories such as ‘common sense’ should always arouse the suspicions of the historian, see Carolyn Steedman, ‘The Peculiarities of English Autobiography: an Autobiographical Education, 1945-1975’, in Christa Hämmerle (ed.), *Plurality and Individuality: Autobiographical Cultures in Europe*, (Wien, 1995), p. 86; Peter Miller and Nicholas Rose, ‘The Tavistock Programme: the Government of Subjectivity and Social Life’, *Sociology*, 22 (1988), p. 171.

¹¹ Meyer, ‘Myths of Socialization and of Personality’, p. 208.

¹² Miller and Rose, ‘The Tavistock Programme’, p. 171.

¹³ Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: the Shaping of the Private Self*, (London and New York, 1989); Michel Foucault in Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: a Seminar with Michel Foucault*, (London, 1988), pp. 16-49; Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus’, in Louis Althusser, (trans. Ben Brewster), *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, (New York, 1971), pp. 127-188.

diffuse psychological language, in the twentieth century rendered the population of Western democracies ‘governable subjects.’ Similarly, Mike Savage links the ascendancy of the social sciences in the post-war period to the Western emphasis of democracy: ruling by consent, but also through in-depth knowledge of the populace.¹⁴ In the context of the early Cold War therefore, one might argue that ‘subjectivising techniques’, from psychology to the pre-eminence of social scientists, meant that the state had a crucial role in forming subjectivity.¹⁵

Yet to what extent were these practices evident in one of the state’s foremost agencies, the military? In the case of the Korean War, we can *certainly* argue that British servicemen were exposed to a wide range of subjectivising technologies. In their recruitment, potential officers (both regular and National Service) had to undergo examination by the War Office Selection Board (WOSB). Introduced in 1941 WOSBs (or ‘wosbees’) were, as one proponent put it, designed to ‘ensure that no potential officer material shall slip through the net.’¹⁶ By the Korean War, WOSB procedures were firmly established and were based on the categorisation of men according to various ‘personality’ criteria and their function in a group. Models for particular individuals within the organisation also applied to the ranks, none more so than with the figure of the Regimental Sergeant-Major. Psychoanalyst Tom Main wrote in 1958 that ‘without him the location of evil would be unknown – both men and officers would have to find it in each other – and worse, perhaps even in themselves.’¹⁷ Due to the prevalence of psychoanalysis in the military from the 1940s, servicemen were thus encouraged to define their role and subjectivity within a group and indeed within democracy itself.¹⁸ This state-directed subjectivity in the military mirrors a process at work in society at large, as ‘group theories’ were increasingly popular within British industry too.¹⁹

¹⁴ Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: the Politics of Method*, (Oxford, 2010), p. 68; Char Roone Miller, *Taylored Citizenships: State Institutions and Subjectivity*, (Westport Connecticut and London, 2002).

¹⁵ Hellbeck, ‘Working, Struggling, Becoming’, p. 343.

¹⁶ National Archives, War Office, Enquiry into War Office Selection Board, 1946, WO 32/12134.

¹⁷ T.F. Main, ‘Some Thoughts on Group Behaviour’, July 1958, pp. 5 -6, Main Papers, British Psychoanalytical Society Archives, PO7/A/12.

¹⁸ Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. 68.

¹⁹ See Charles A. Oakley, *Men at Work*, (London, 1945).

Yet Mathew Thomson argues that the development of the ‘psychological subject’ was in fact far from a simple universal model and that subjectivity was not necessarily built around control and regulation.²⁰ This poses the question: does this state-directed subjectivity model adequately describe the process of self formation in the Korean War? In short, did British soldiers actually identify with the models presented to them?

One way to answer this question is to examine the subjectivity of soldiers removed from the frontline and the British military hierarchy, such as prisoners of war, to see if the categorisation and models imposed on them from their recruitment continued to inform their self-perception. Of the 63,000 British servicemen involved in the Korean War, 1076 were killed and 1060 were taken prisoner.²¹ Prisoners were taken in four principal stages, correlating with the scale of British engagement in the conflict, with the largest number taken at Imjin River in April 1951. Although initially imprisoned by North Korean forces, the Chinese assumed responsibility for all prisoners in 1951 and marched the first three groups northwards to camps along the Yalu River.²² Officers formed a small minority of those taken prisoner and after the initial march north the Chinese separated them and senior Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) from the other ranks in an attempt to undermine the traditions of military hierarchy and deference. Prisoners attended compulsory, intensive political education classes for the first year of their captivity on the virtues of Communism and the excesses of American imperialism.²³

Most crucially British prisoners were forced to produce a wide range of autobiographical material. From autobiographical forms, to written diaries and spoken self-criticism, the Chinese People’s

²⁰ Mathew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain*, (Oxford and New York, 2006), pp. 6 -7.

²¹ Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *Official History, The British Part in the Korean War, Volume II: An Honourable Discharge*, (London, 1995), p. 486.

²² Ministry of Defence, ‘Report of the Advisory Panel of Prisoner of War Conduct after Capture’, August 1955, AIR 8/2473, p. 29.

²³ National Army Museum, Private Papers of Lieutenant Colonel J.G. Meade, Report by Lieutenant Cooke on the Conduct of Prisoners of War of the VIII KRI Hussars Captured in Korea 1951-1953, c. 1953/4, pp. 1-2. Cooke describes the ‘Lenient Policy’ upon which Chinese political education was predicated: ‘We, the U.N. force in Korea were the aggressors, and as such...war criminals... It was however pointed out to us that by a great concession on the part of our captors, we...would receive a standard of treatment “equal” to that laid down in the Geneva Convention for Prisoners of War, provided that we acknowledged their line of reasoning...’

Volunteers forced British and UN Prisoners to consider, and thus to re-consider, their own subjectivity. Accordingly the entry pages of the standard diary produced in 1951 by the CPV for use by prisoners was adorned with sayings such as ‘Don’t be fodder for the war profiteers’, ‘This war is senseless, get together to stop it’, and ‘British soldiers! Don’t risk your lives for the Yankee bosses’.²⁴ No other enemy in the twentieth century had demanded such self-reflexivity and political re-evaluation from the British and in this way the Korean War was unique.²⁵

Much of the surviving material demonstrates an enduring loyalty to Britain and to Western democracy amongst prisoners: Colonel Carne of the Gloucestershire Regiment was subjected to solitary confinement and beating for refusing to divulge information.²⁶ Similarly, Dennis Lankford, the only British Naval officer to be taken prisoner refused to divulge any more information than name, rank and number, knowing that these were the only markers of identity he was permitted to give and he provided only fictitious accounts of his life.²⁷

Yet my analysis so far has shown that the majority of rank-and-file British prisoners gave far more autobiographical information than their name, rank and number. Furthermore, their life-writing shows the enduring importance of other affiliations, notably regimental and religious identities. The latter is particularly revealing: in times of crisis, servicemen used religion as a source of comfort and even identity. On the first page of John Whittaker Shaw’s Chinese-issued 1951 Manuscript diary he printed an accurate extract from Psalm 23 from the St. James Bible: ‘YEA THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH I WILL FEAR NO EVIL: FOR THOU ART WITH ME; THY ROD AND THY STAFF COMFORT ME.’²⁸ Elsewhere, National Serviceman Edward Beckerley remembers reciting the first verse of ‘Abide with Me’ to himself each night on the march

²⁴ Diary for 1951, Chinese People’s Volunteers, Imperial War Museum, Documents 12481.

²⁵ Arguably this attention originated in Chinese life-writing tradition, see Aaron William Moore, ‘Talk about Heroes: Expressions of Self-Mobilization and Despair in Chinese War Diaries, 1911-1938’, *Twentieth Century China* 34,2 (2009), pp.30-54.

²⁶ National Archives, War Office, Verbatim Transcription of Re-interrogation of Carne with Lieut. Colonel J.F.D Murphy, (Psychiatric Department of the Royal Army Medical Corps) and Cyril Cunningham, c. December 1953, WO 208/4021.

²⁷ Dennis Lankford, *I Defy! The Story of Lieutenant Dennis Lankford*, (London, 1954), pp. 83-84.

²⁸ Imperial War Museum, Private Papers of John Whittaker Shaw, Manuscript Diary for 1951, Documents 7803.

northwards, ‘the words being appropriate to the situation I found myself in...’²⁹ The endurance of religious affiliations amongst the military in the 1950s undermines models of the ‘psychologization of ethics’ and provides an alternative interpretation to narratives of twentieth-century secularisation.³⁰ Soldiers subtly, even unconsciously, resisted both the models they were taught in their training and those forced on them by their Chinese captors.

The treatment of returned prisoners of war also demonstrates the limitations of state-directed subjectivity. The British prisoner of war was not treated with as much suspicion as his American counterpart was in a US domestic context of ‘Red Scares’. However, the figure of the returned prisoner prompted great anxiety in post-war Britain and had the potential to unsettle the still relatively unstable construction of the democratic self.³¹ As previously stated, ‘brainwashing’ represents an important, yet hitherto under-researched, chapter in the history of subjectivity.³² The term ‘brainwashing’ was first used in the Korean War by American journalist Edward Hunter and referred to the psychological manipulation and suggestive techniques used in the Chinese prisoner-of-war camps.³³ The term itself implies that subjects’ whole sense of self and loyalty could be completely transformed, washed blank, by interrogatory techniques. The popularity of American novels and films such as *The Rack* (1956), *The Brink of Hell* (1957) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), as well as British spy fiction illuminates concerns over the brainwashed prisoner of war returning to destroy the society he once called home.³⁴ Such worries were also demonstrated by the psychological interrogations of returned prisoners of war by British authorities, keen to assess whether

²⁹ Imperial War Museum, Private Papers of Edward Beckerley, typescript unpublished memoir, p. 15.

³⁰ Keith Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales: the Christian Church 1900-2000*, (Oxford and New York, 2008), pp. 317-320; S.J.D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England*, (Cambridge and New York, 2011), p. 271.

³¹ In the course of the twentieth century the changed ‘personality’ of the prisoner of war became an enduring cultural trope: it perhaps even remains today, as seen for example with the popular US drama *Homeland*, where the loyalties of a returned POW from Iraq are constantly questioned by fellow characters and television audiences alike. See *Homeland*, prod. Fox 21, (2011).

³² Other notable works on the history of brainwashing include Susan L. Carruthers, *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape and Brainwashing*, (Berkeley and London, 2002).

³³ National Archives, Air Ministry, Treatment of Returned POWs from Korea, Ministry of Defence Report of the Advisory Panel on P.O.W. Conduct After Capture, pp. 15-16, AIR 8/2473; Edward Hunter, *Brainwashing in Red China: the Calculated Destruction of Men’s Minds (Revised Edition)*, (New York, 1953).

³⁴ *The Rack*, dir. Arnold Laven, (1956); *The Brink of Hell*, dir. Mervyn LeRoy (1957); *The Manchurian Candidate*, dir. John Frankenheimer, (1962).

‘brainwashing’ had occurred. Such worries persisted even after the military itself ceased to use the term: in 1960, the *Daily Mail* alleged that the British Army used ‘brainwashing’ techniques in their own units.³⁵ Crucially, by the 1960s brainwashing was no longer used to refer to Chinese Communists specifically, but had become a generalised, usually pejorative term to describe how organisations and charismatic figures exerted influence over unquestioning individuals.³⁶ Yet the term never allows for the possibility that soldiers might deviate *without* external influence.

It is instructive therefore to return to Condrón’s idea of ‘thinking soldiers’. His assertion that ‘the soldier today can no longer be viewed as a robot’ was undoubtedly a political statement, criticising Western government.³⁷ Yet there were ‘thinking soldiers’ in Korea: British servicemen were asked by military authorities to define themselves as part of a group and a democracy. As one psychologist noted in 1945, ‘If a man has a lot higher than that of an ant, it must be linked up with capacity to know what he is doing’.³⁸ Nevertheless ‘thinking’ could also transcend the models offered by the state: ordinary rank-and-file servicemen did not identify with the central models forced upon them by either the British or Chinese. Anxieties within British societies at large further demonstrate an awareness that the prisoner of war in Korea was far from the archetype of loyalty: he too could be subject to (and subjectivised by) external, nefarious influence.

I began my paper today by restating the historiographical assumption that the self is not trans-historical concept. Questioning an idea of innate, immutable selfhood does not remove the idea of human agency from our study of the past: by contrast, this paper has endeavoured to show that such investigation historicises the human subject. As historians of subjectivity, we must be cautious not to cast the self as a passive recipient, a ‘palimpsest’ of modern projects of governmentality. The soldier of the Korean War, exposed to new political ideas, demonstrates the ability to think beyond the limits

³⁵ Keith Thompson, ‘Brainwashing Shocks: War Office Admits Grilling Tests on Elite Troops’, *Daily Mail*, 9 March 1960.

³⁶ D.J. Morey, ‘A Vicar Defends Dr. Billy Graham’, *Somerset County Herald*, 6 May 1961, p. 6. Morey defends American evangelist Dr. Billy Graham against claims that his followers are ‘brainwashed’.

³⁷ Condrón, Corden and Sullivan (eds.), *Thinking Soldiers by Men Who Fought in Korea*, p. 1.

³⁸ Oakley, *Men at Work*, p. 8.

of the state-directed subjectivity, even for a brief period of time. My small case study today therefore suggests that whilst theories of state and self are highly applicable to histories of the twentieth century, the capability of the individual to react to situations in non-prescribed ways should always be considered.

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