

“Better to Stop the Enemy Offensive Here than to Do It Closer to the Home”: The Korean War 1950–1953 in Canadian Public Discourse

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to study the perception of the Korean War of 1950–1953 by Canadian society, as well as its place and main characteristics in the public discourse of the country. The **relevance** of this issue lies in the fact that the Korean War is an important component of the Cold War for Canada as an armed conflict in which the country had seen direct action as a part of the collective West. Accordingly, the discursive explanations of the causes, nature and meaning of the war that were widespread in the country are of great interest. **Main results:** It was concluded that the parameters of the war were clearer in the professional political discourse than in the public discourse as a whole. It was found that the relevance of the conflict in society was lower than hypothetical due to the small number of the contingent, the absence of compulsion to participate in the war, and a certain stability of the framework of the Cold war as of the beginning of the 1950s. The impact of the dynamics of hostilities in different periods on the discursive perception of conflict was also analyzed. It was also discovered that the parliamentary political forces as a whole had a consensus perception of the role that the country should play in the war, but slightly different ideological motivations for such participation.

Conclusions: The Korean War of 1950–1953 received a specific response in Canadian public discourse. At the beginning, its prospective dimensions were not yet clear, but the deployment of large-scale hostilities did not lead to total attention to the conflict – it did not receive the highest priority even before some internal Canadian problems. Further involvement of the People's Republic of China in the war and the USSR led to further polarization of the world in the eyes of Canadians, as did the ideological differences of the parties. But such an influence was to a lesser extent than might have been expected – in some way due to the official position that the hostilities were an operation under the auspices of the UN, rather than a struggle against world communism. Another reason was the short duration of intense hostilities with the participation of the Canadian contingent and the transition of the war into a slow-down phase already in the middle of 1951. The originality and scientific novelty of the study consists in the application of new methodological principles for the first time to the study of the issues of the article and shifting the focus of attention from military and diplomatic parameters to the discursive ones.

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«Краще зупинити ворожий наступ тут, ніж робити це ближче до Батьківщини»: Корейська війна 1950–1953 рр. у канадському суспільному дискурсі

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Анотація

Мета дослідження полягає у вивченні сприйняття канадським суспільством Корейської війни 1950–1953 рр., її місця та основних характеристик у суспільному дискурсі країни. **Актуальність** цієї проблеми полягає в тому, що Корейська війна є важливою складовою «холодної війни» для Канади як збройний конфлікт, в якому країна взяла пряму участь як частина колективного Заходу. Відповідно, значну цікавість становлять дискурсивно поширені в країні пояснення причин, характеру та значення війни. **Основні результати:** Встановлено, що параметри війни були більш зрозумілими в політикумі, ніж в суспільному дискурсі в цілому. З'ясовано, що актуальність конфлікту в суспільстві була нижчою за гіпотетичну через невелику чисельність контингенту, відсутність примусу до участі у війні та певну усталеність рамки «холодної війни» станом на початок 1950-тих рр. Оцінено вплив динаміки бойових дій у різні періоди на дискурсивне сприйняття конфлікту. Встановлено також, що парламентські політичні сили в цілому мали консенсусне сприйняття ролі, яку має зайняти країна у війні, але дещо відмінні ідеологічні мотивації до такої участі.

Висновки. Корейська війна 1950–1953 рр. отримала специфічний відгук у канадському суспільному дискурсі. На початку її перспективні масштаби ще не були зрозумілими, проте й розгортання масштабних бойових дій не призвело до концентрації уваги до конфлікту – він не отримував переважний пріоритет навіть перед деякими внутрішньоканадськими проблемами. Подальше втягування КНР та СРСР до війни призвели до поляризації світу в очах канадців. Але такий вплив мав менше значення, ніж можна було очікувати – в тому числі через офіційну позицію про сутність бойових дій як операції під егідою ООН, аніж боротьби зі світовим комунізмом. Іншою причиною була невелика тривалість інтенсивних бойових дій за участі канадського контингенту та перехід війни в уповільнену фазу вже з середини 1951 р. Оригінальність та наукова новизна дослідження полягає у застосуванні вперше нових методологічних засад до вивчення проблематики статті та зміщенні фокусу уваги від військових та дипломатичних параметрів до дискурсивних.

Ключові слова: Корейська війна, Канада, «холодна війна», дискурс, ООН**Цитування:** Ткаченко В. «Краще зупинити ворожий наступ тут, ніж робити це ближче до Батьківщини»: Корейська війна 1950–1953 рр. у канадському суспільному дискурсі. *Науково-теоретичний альманах Грانی*. 2022. Том 25. №6. С. 22–27. <https://doi.org/10.15421/172265>

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Introduction.

Problem definition. The relevance of the mentioned topic lies in the high importance of the Korean War of 1950–1953 within the framework of the history of the Cold War as an important milestone that to some extent laid the context of the confrontation for the future. For Canada, these events were discursively important as the first post-World War II large-scale armed conflict in which the country took a significant and direct role.

Historiography. The high relevance of the researched question is also confirmed by the strong attention in the scientific environment. Thus, the historiography of the problem includes the works of David Bercuson (2002), Greg Donaghy (2011; 2014), Denis Stairs (2000), William Johnston (2011), and George Egerton (1997). However, these scholars focused mainly on the military-diplomatic aspects of the issue, rather than on discursive practices as such. Don Munton was somewhat closer to our aims in its focus on the Canadian media (Munton, 1984). Nevertheless, it was more of a social study to show the general correlations of the public opinions shifts to the media coverages of the Cold War events during the period studied by the author. Accordingly, **the Aim of our Study** is to investigate the perception of the Korean War as an armed and geopolitical conflict in the public discourse of Canada, to study the level of its relevance, as well as the state of awareness of its causes, the characteristics of the opposing parties and the results.

Sources. The source base of our article is multifaceted, which is motivated by the need to reveal different plans and levels of application of discursive practices. It includes official documents, specifically Canadian parliamentary debates and official government reports on the war, media materials, interviews and memoirs. Caricatures and audio-visual sources that were designed to demonstrate war stories, including documentaries, were also studied. **Methods and methodology.** In our work, in addition to general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis, deduction and induction, we also used methods of content analysis of individual sources, as well as discourse analysis in order to highlight the contextual and symbolic content of these events and processes for participants in Canadian public discourse.

The Main Material and Results.

Canada's first massive involvement in the East-West military confrontation occurred in 1950 during the Korean War. At this point, the situation in Asia has changed; in mainland China, the communists won, who proclaimed the People's Republic of China, and on the Korean peninsula itself there was a serious threat of the establishment of a communist regime by force. If we take into account demilitarized Japan, it becomes quite clear that the threat of the spread of communism could have been stopped only with the active assistance of the United States. Canada had to determine its place and role in this confrontation, because the security of the Pacific region was extremely important to it.

As we know, the country agreed to provide its troops as part of the implementation of the UN peacekeeping operation. Dean Oliver, an employee of the Canadian Museum of Military History, believes that it was the aggression of the Korean communists that further motivated Ottawa to place its military equipment and army in Europe (Oliver, 2022). Canadian political elites reacted at the beginning of the war in a consolidated and approving way. Questions arose only about the scope and specific forms of participation. An indicator of this, in our opinion, was the unanimity of all parties represented in the House of Commons (Official History, 1966). Immediately before the intervention in the war, the Canadian Prime Minister Louis Saint Laurent declared "...any participation of Canada in the implementation of the UN resolution – and I want to emphasize this – will not be participation in the war against any state. It would be our participation in a collective police action under the control and authority of the United Nations in order to restore peace ... only under such circumstances this country would be involved in such actions" (Official History, 1966).

At the beginning of the conflict, its significance (and prospective scope) was not fully understood in Canada. Thus, on June 26, 1950, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Lester Pearson's speech in Parliament only briefly summarized the results of the UN Security Council's vote for the resolution and noted the above-described position of the government to participate in a peacekeeping operation aimed at curbing North Korean aggression. Not a word was said about communist expansion, and the role of the USSR was described only formally – as a state that abstained from voting in the Security Council. The opposition also did not manage to expand the discussion – except that the issue of the need for government participation in the possible evacuation of Canadians from Korea was raised (House of Commons, 1950b). After the US President Gary Truman announced plans to actively involve the United States armed forces in the war, Secretary of State Lester Pearson welcomed this decision, calling it a chance to resolve the contradictions that had divided the country (House of Commons, 1950c). Characteristically, a government official more often refers to the South simply as "Korea" rather than "South Korea," while the North is always clearly referred to as "North Korea." The reasons for this approach were simple – Ottawa recognized Syngman Rhee's regime as the legitimate authority in all of Korea and had no diplomatic relations with the North. Likewise, the Republic of Korea was proclaimed before the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Finally, the government in Seoul was recognized by the UN General Assembly as the only legitimate authority on the peninsula.

The opposition also welcomed such a course. Thus, Tory MP Gordon Graydon said that he listened to Pearson's statement with deep interest and support (House of Commons, 1950d). He also noted that in

matters of international relations, the parliament should demonstrate unity as "Canadians" "despite their party affiliation" (House of Commons, 1950e). Conservative leader George Drew was more radical and portrayed the Northern invasion as "Kremlin aggression", giving the events a global context (House of Commons, 1950f). In his speech, the military preparations of the USSR were also described.

The Social Credit party leader Solon Earl Low not only supported the involvement in the conflict, but said Canada had both a legal and moral obligation to do so (House of Commons, 1950g). It is characteristic that the South's calls for support from him were noted as the desired goal of restoring the control of the Syngman Rhee regime precisely over the areas up to the former demarcation line. Even the aid was supposed to go to the "Government of South Korea", even though Seoul was known to claim sovereignty over the entire peninsula, not just the area south of the 38th parallel. So, the first decision was supported by parliamentarians. But first of all, it was not about stopping the expansion of communism as for everyone, but more of the struggle for freedom – as Canadian politicians understood it through the prism of their own country's view of democracy.

Was Canada's involvement a move in the fairway of US (and/or UK) policy? Liberal MP Jean-Francois Pouliot noted that the attitude and involvement in the war was excessive at its very beginning. It was about both the media characteristics of the events – largely anti-Soviet – and the government's intention to join the counter-aggression earlier than the UN calls for it (House of Commons, 1950e). However, his conservative opponent Howard Green justified the actions of Washington and London, noting that "these two great powers that are leading the world today in this crisis ... I believe that Canada should stand by them". His colleague from Social Credit, John Blackmore, noted that "they've always done it...they shouldn't have waited for a UN decision" (House of Commons, 1950h).

So, in the context of Canada's participation in the global confrontation, the attitude of political forces already shows certain differences in positions. Although in one way or another all the actors shared serious hopes for the UN and a desire to protect the common values of the West (first of all, freedom in the broadest sense), there was a certain difference. For conservatives, participation in the conflict was a natural manifestation of the unity of the Anglo-Saxon world and even a certain messianism, an urge to fight the influence of the "Kremlin". However, for the Liberals it was a fight for Canadian national values, for the interests of their own country more than for the interests of the "West". The war and the participation in it didn't become a one-time generation of these foundations – it simply sharpened the accents and revealed them more precisely.

Public reaction to participation in the conflict was not unanimous. As event participant Andrew Moffett

notes in his memoirs, "The truth is that even during the war, few Canadians knew we were part of [the] war and seemed even less concerned about it!" (Heritage Tours, 2014). A large number of young people who came under the draft for peacekeeping forces were motivated and had a positive attitude to their prospects – participation in the military contingent designed to be sent to Korea was voluntary (Canada's Army, 1956). As of March 1951, 10,208 soldiers were mobilized, and 1,521 cases of AWOL were recorded. Another 2,230 people were dismissed as unfit for military service (Official History, 1966).

Simultaneously with the beginning of the hot phase of the war in 1950, a general strike of railway workers took place in the country, which largely paralyzed the transport system. It was associated with economic reasons – rising prices while maintaining the level of wages in 1948-1950 and was organized not by the Canada communists, but by trade unions. The most popular newspapers published during this period of time sometimes placed headlines on the situation in Korea and on the strike on their front pages, but the latter often prevailed in terms of volume. For example, the front page of the Montreal Daily Star on August 19, 1950, carried the headline: "Last-ditch effort begins to avert rail strike" and the following line: "Allies report landing behind Red lines in Korea" (Perry, 2000). And this is at the same time when there are fierce battles for the Pusan Perimeter and the UN troops are on the verge of defeat, fighting for their last bridgehead on the peninsula! The Gazette of August 30, 1950 also carried news of the strike and the war simultaneously under the headline "British troops rush to front as Reds launch three major offensives in Korea" above even the title of the paper. But at the same time, located further, the headline "The end of the strike is set" was twice as large in font (Perry, 2000).

A new turn in the war, associated with the intervention of the People's Republic of China into the hostilities, changed the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula and led to a reassessment of prospects by the participants of the peacekeeping contingent. However, if the goal of Washington was primarily the fight against communism in Asia, in which it was impossible to show weakness, Ottawa thought about how to reduce losses (Stairs, 2000). In the latter period, the mass media also showed a lack of enthusiasm – for example, "The Globe and Mail" in 1953 characterized the Korean War as "a waste of lives and materials" (Quaiattini, 2010). Another factor in the Canadians' loss of enthusiasm was the prolongation of the war and the transition of the communists to propaganda actions instead of the military. Thus, veterans of this war later recalled in an interview: "[at Christmas] ... they put holiday cards in barbed wire. On one side was a black and white picture of us hiding in the trenches, while on the other side was a color picture of Americans celebrating Christmas with a big, big turkey, fresh from the oven! When you're sitting there, eating canned soup, and you

see this beautiful turkey dinner ... it really makes you think" (Propaganda, 2021). However, this did not lead to critical losses of discipline – primarily, from our point of view, due to the demarcation in 1953 and the subsequent withdrawal of the contingent. In addition, Canadian officers were ready for this and conducted educational work with the combat staff. War veteran Arthur Lortier recalled: "These things were meant to lower morale, but we were aware of their tactics. Our command told us what to expect. So, we knew, and we didn't let it worry us" (Propaganda, 2021). As Terry Dale, an actor who visited Korea with a show for fighters, recalled, "Most of the soldiers never talked about the war... They were always optimistic... never talked about the futility of it all. The worst thing they admitted was being homesick" (Barris, 2003).

As we can see, the Canadian society and the political elite in particular did not refuse to participate in the confrontation together with the West, but at the same time did not demonstrate a readiness to spend all the state's forces on it. Therefore, the war became a matter of volunteers and professional soldiers, which determined its perception by the contingent. In addition, visual sources show that the Korean War was viewed precisely in the context of this confrontation – their enemy is the "reds", and the communist world was understood as a single entity (We Still Have, 1950). At the same time, the aggression of North Korea was considered in connection with other, primarily Soviet aggressive episodes – the invasion of the Baltic States in 1940, the imposition of communist ideology on the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe, etc. (Not Exactly Ready, 1951). Of course, the East was shown as the sole culprit of the conflict, and its arguments were presented as propaganda (Which Will Fit, 1953). The documentary *With the Canadians in Korea* (1952), which described the situation of Canadian units during the war, makes extensive use of the term "communists" as a description of the enemy side, using "North Koreans" or "Chinese" mainly at the beginning. This, however, was also explained by the need to generalize the opposing side. At the end of the film, when demonstrating the front-line positions of Canadian soldiers, it was noted that "they are always ready to stop the enemy's offensive ... here, rather than doing it closer to the Motherland" (*With the Canadians in Korea*, 1952). Thus, the media was aware of the threat of confrontation escalation not only on the Korean Peninsula, but also in other parts of the world, not excluding the territory of Canada.

Of course, there were fears that the conflict would develop into a wider one and lead to a global war. Even at the beginning of the conflict, conservative Howard Green noted in Parliament that the purpose of Canada's participation (as well as the USA and Great Britain) is to prevent the Third World War. He also noted that "Russia" poses a direct threat to North America, citing General McNaughton's statement of June 22, 1950 (House of

Commons, 1950a). As scientist Don Munton notes, already in 1950, 6 out of 10 Canadians expected another world war in the next 5 years; after de-escalation by 1955, this ratio changed to 1 in 10 (Munton, 1984, p. 184).

What were the reasons for the decrease in negative expectations? This had several motivations. First of all, let's focus on how the nature of the Korean War for Canada and its consequences affected this.

Although Canada fielded a significant (third largest) contingent, its participation was limited. A large part arrived already in 1951 after the cessation of active hostilities. David Bercuson believes that the Armed Forces of the country were critically unprepared for war, but the state kept silent about this fact and the war details themselves (Bercuson, 2002, XIII-XIV). Indeed, for most Canadians, it has become something distant, a media story (and often only just one of the leading ones). In addition, since the recruitment was voluntary, there did not arise a situation like the Second World War crisis of conscription for overseas service, which then divided society and the country's politicians. The size of the contingent itself was relatively small even for the 14-million-strong Canada at the time – 21,940 people, including the maximum simultaneous number – 8,123 people. For comparison, the number of personnel of the US Armed Forces in the theater of operations was 1,153,000 people (Official History, 1966). We must note that there are certain differences of opinion in the specialized literature regarding the number of troops. They are related to the inclusion or exclusion of personnel of the naval forces and those involved in logistics. In the case of units of the US Armed Forces, the forces in the region as a whole (particularly in Japan) are also often considered. However, this does not have a key effect on the ratio and does not destroy our concept. The percentage of those killed in the war was relatively low. The official figure is 516 people, which means 2.3% of the servicemen involved (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2022).

The number of prisoners was also small – 33 people. However, their fate was not easy. In particular, serious pressure was exerted on them. For example, they were left outside the bunkers during air raids so that the prisoners could sign a petition to the UN requesting an end to the bombings (Barris, 2003). In addition, prisoners were subjected to beatings, intensive interrogations, reduced rations and moral abuse. However, there is no evidence of collaboration with the Communists of any of the Canadian prisoners, while a large number of North Koreans and Chinese from captivity refused to return. It should be noted that in general there were such cases in the UN forces – 21 American servicemen and one British refused to return. As a historian Greg Donaghy notes, "the escape of a large number of communist prisoners of war to the West was a significant victory for Cold War propaganda" (Donaghy, 2011, p. 138).

However, upon their release after the end of the active phase of the conflict, they were subjected to interrogations and abuse by the Canadian side. Lance

Corporal Len Badowich recalled: "Then, there was more interrogation by our own intelligence," Badowich continued, "as if we'd committed a crime. 'Why didn't you escape?' they asked us. How the hell do you escape in Korea where everybody is Oriental and you're white? Where do you go? Nobody could have escaped. These assholes made us feel like we had committed a crime – or deserted" (Barris, 2015). In a later dimension in Canadian public discourse, the Korean War would be called "Forgotten". Soldiers of this war who tried to visit veterans' organizations (even in their own military uniform) were often refused. Also, they were not granted real estate loans intended for veterans (Canada and the Korean War, 2021).

The duration of the active phase of the war also affected the rapid decrease in resonance. Despite the duration of hostilities from 1950 to 1953, the largest of them occurred in the second half of 1950 – the first half of 1951. Finally, there was no escalation of the conflict. Despite the thesis about the conflict with the communist world and the active involvement of Chinese "volunteers", the war was not resolved either between the USA and the USSR, or between the USA and the People's Republic of China. Thus, it was possible to localize the war both in time and space. It is not by chance that the official summary of the Canadian General Staff already in 1956 called it a "peripheral" and local conflict (Canada's Army, 1956).

The mentioned official summary of the Canadian General Staff, which was published in 1956, is an important source for understanding the perception of the enemy side (Canada's Army, 1956). It contains such enemy identifications as:

- "communists" – 33 mentions, as well as 3 - "reds";
- "USSR" and affiliates – 6 mentions, but 5 of them are in the context of diplomacy, and only one mentions North Korea as a "Soviet-sponsored state"
- "China" – 79 mentions;
- "North Korea" – 29 mentions.

At the same time, #1 was often used in connection with #3 and 4 – in ordinary semantic blocks. Yes, we have to understand that in the official document rhetoric is limited to a certain extent by style – and even then, certain accents are already visible. Of course, since it was primarily about combat operations, this determined the ratio of #2–4 due to the proportion of the parties' troops participating in the battles with the Canadians.

The assessment of the meaning of the war itself is, of course, balanced, but it also contains indicative points. The conflict is not presented purely through the prism of the fight against communism, but rather as a UN military operation. However, the context of the Cold War is still demonstrated – the beginning of the war is noted as "a communist attack against South Korea, an act of aggression, a local hot incident of the Cold War". From the point of view of Canadian participation, the Korean War is presented as a "contribution to the defense of the

West", and the dead, in the opinion of the author, "gave their lives for one of the best causes for which people have ever sacrificed themselves. If, as the old Roman proverb says, it is sweet and dignified to die for one's country, then, undoubtedly, it is no less dignified to die for the future of humanity" (Canada's Army, 1956).

It should be noted that the public rhetoric after the cessation of hostilities was also significantly softened by political figures. The statement that the war was a successful action to achieve peace and stop aggression (at the same time, the aggressor was not articulated), and it is necessary to remember the dead by whose blood this was achieved becomes the main leitmotif. Such statements were made by the liberal MP Allan Hollingworth (House of Commons, 1953a), the leader of the Conservatives George Drew (House of Commons, 1953b), and the Prime Minister Louis Saint Laurent (House of Commons, 1953c). The purpose of this, in our opinion, was the desire to reach a settlement and not to provoke the parties with aggressive statements.

Conclusions. So, it is no coincidence that the Korean War of 1950–1953 is often called the "forgotten war" in thematic historiography. Despite its urgent relevance, in the public discourse of Canada attention to the conflict was expressed mainly at the level of officials. In the responses of the Prime Minister and MPs from the ruling Liberal Party, assessments of the conflict were quite restrained and focused on the perception of Canada's contribution as a component of peacekeeping operations under the auspices of the UN. A more radical emphasis on the confrontation between East and West was expressed mostly by more right-wing conservatives and representatives of Social Credit. Instead, the mass media and even the belligerent Canadians themselves did not always consider it a system-forming conflict, a component of a broader plan of global geopolitical confrontation. The limited country participation in the war effort also had affected that.

It can also be stated that by 1950 the possibility of the Communist expansion was seen as real. After the forced instatement of the Communist regimes in the second half of 1940s and the Berlin blockade of 1948–49 it was clear that the absence of retaliation inspired further action and could have led to dangerous outcomes. This fact explains the simplicity shown by the Canadian politicians while forming a reaction on these events. In the meantime, the further evolution of the course of conflict hardly affected the discursive approaches to it, mainly because the Canadian forces were not amongst the most damaged units in the second half of 1950. The main change was made by the active involvement of the People's Republic of China; it had symbolically unified the communist "world" in the eyes of the West and Canadian society in particular. As we can see, the actions made by Ottawa were mainly not questioned by the public, except in relation to the material and financial resources usage which was sometimes considered excess by the media.

In the light of the above mentioned we can state that the Korean War of 1950-1953 was regarded as an ordinary – and not that much important – part of the Cold War reality in Canadian discourse. Nevertheless, the USSR abstention in the UN vote made this war for

Canada not the conflict fought “by the West” but the “UN peacekeeping forces”, at least *de jure*. This was also important in spite of the Liberal government’s effort to form an independent foreign policy for the country.

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