

Book Review: Embassies in Armed Conflict

by Blog Admin

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*During wartime, embassies assume different roles and face various situations. An embassy might represent a belligerent state while being situated in an enemy, an allied, or a neutral state. Conversely, it might represent a neutral state, while having to function in a belligerent state. How does an embassy's situation affect its priorities? How does it affect its staff and mission? **Embassies in Armed Conflict** examines these issues and the problems wartime embassies encounter by looking primarily at the experiences of American, British, and Indian embassies. **Gaynor Johnson** highly recommends for historians and scholars of international diplomacy.*

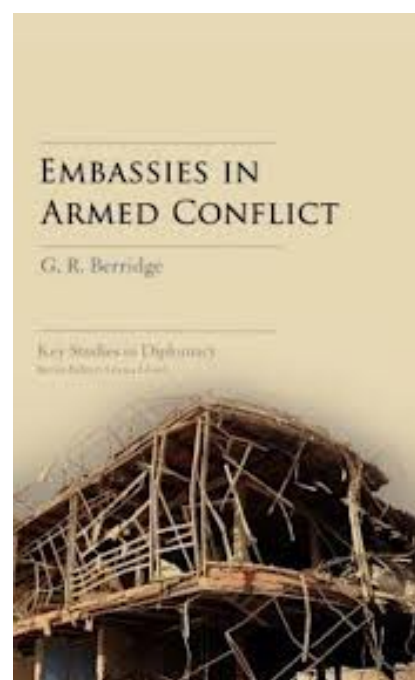
Embassies in Armed Conflict. Geoffrey Berridge. Continuum Books. February 2012.

This book by [Geoffrey Berridge](#), one of the leading experts in diplomatic theory in the UK, is the latest volume in the new and very useful *Key Studies in Diplomacy* series, edited by Lorna Lloyd. The aim of the book is to examine the conduct of diplomacy during times of armed conflict. Berridge is at pains to avoid the use of the word war in his title because when examining the post-1945 world, that word is not, in his view, specific enough. He is not interested in the politics and diplomacy of ideologically driven brinkmanship, but is concerned with the 'regional' wars that the Cold War spawned, in Korea and Vietnam, for example.

The book adopts a thematic rather than a chronological approach. There are five chapters: The Military Component; Embassies in Enemy States; Neutral Embassies to Belligerents; Belligerent Embassies to Neutrals and Embassies to Frontline Allies. The majority of the examples are drawn from the period after the Second World War, but there is also plenty to interest historians of the earlier half of the twentieth century as well as scholars of very contemporary politics and diplomatic strategy.

In many respects, the book represents a synthesis of the main strands of Berridge's earlier work, and it is difficult to identify another scholar with Berridge's depth and breadth of insight into this material. The volume is not a text book, but the author writes with a clarity and wit that will make the material accessible to students of diplomacy as well as offering significant pause for thought to more seasoned scholars.

Berridge sets himself a number of tasks in the book. The principal of these is to analyse how British embassies and their occupants behaved when they suddenly found themselves in a hostile environment, either as a result of the declaration of war or because of local political unrest or revolution. Many readers will be aware of how the British embassy in the Netherlands was evacuated in the wake of the Nazi invasion in the spring of 1940 from the pages of the memoirs of Sir Lancelot Oliphant, their wider significance being explored here (pp.38-39). Berridge carefully maps out the extent to which such individuals are protected by international law, but also points out some important grey areas, most of which relate to the consistency with which such requirements are applied by the accredited government. In the first half of the century, international law paid little attention to the rights of diplomats, apparently viewing them merely as 'foreign nationals', this began to change in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Berridge's book will therefore be of interests to students of the interface between international law and diplomacy, but he stops short of mapping out exactly how this relationship changed over time. And change it did, especially during the twentieth century in the Cold War and post-Cold War era.



However, the book's principal significance is the way in which Berridge offers a preliminary engagement with a severely neglected area, the relationship between military intelligence in all its forms and the conduct of diplomacy. As he rightly points out, since the end of the nineteenth century, British embassies located in the capital cities of the Great Powers contained a large number of military attachés, whose ranks were swelled significantly before, during and after the two world wars and at the height of the Cold War. So much so that British embassies such as that in Berlin were effectively 'militarised' institutions, an unfortunate development given the frequency with which the British government wished to project a policy of peace and reconciliation to Germany during the twentieth century. Berridge provides a useful map for others to follow in developing this aspect of diplomatic history.

Berridge's book also highlights the importance of the consular work performed by embassy staff in securing the safe departure of the ex-patriot community prior to the outbreak of hostilities. The intersection of these two strands of diplomacy is an under-researched area, as are so many of the themes discussed in this volume, for example, how to preserve diplomatic relations with a relationship whose political ideology is not democratic. Berridge also makes a useful contribution to the growing literature on the diplomacy of neutrality, how it is maintained and how and why it is abandoned. He rightly argues that the commercial questions form a significantly larger part of the work of embassies in neutral countries than those in other states (p. 103). An example is the research done by British and French embassies in Switzerland during the Cold War to try to locate the assets stripped of Europe's Jewish population by the Nazis.

In the chapter concerning embassies to front line allies, Berridge reminds us that their principal function is to reinforce the bond of friendship with the country in which the embassy is located. He hints at but does not explore the use of embassy premises as venues for official social gatherings and to provide accommodation to dignitaries as part of this function. A further function that he brings to our attention is the way in which embassies with similar cordial relations with each other and with the host country serve as conduits for the sharing of intelligence, both military and commercial. This tactic becomes more and more significant as the twentieth century progressed. This was, for example, as much a function of the British legation in Vienna in the immediate prelude to the First World War as it was during the Cold War.

This is an excellent book that will be of use to a wide range of scholars of international diplomacy. The depth of its erudition and the range of its scope will appeal not only to scholars of diplomatic theory but to diplomatic practitioners anxious to know the heritage of their profession. Its brevity – the book is a mere 177 pages – will also appeal to students keen to get to the heart of cutting-edge thinking on diplomacy quickly. While the book's excellent bibliography offers not only opportunities for further research but helps place Berridge's oeuvre within its wider historiographical context. I highly recommend this book.

Dr Gaynor Johnson is Reader in International History at the [University of Salford](#). She is the author and editor of a number of books on the diplomatic history of the twentieth century, including *The Berlin Embassy of Lord D'Abernon, 1920-1926* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002), *The Foreign Office and Twentieth Century Diplomacy* (Routledge, 2004) and, most recently, *Lord Robert Cecil: Politician and Internationalist* (Ashgate, 2012). She also serves on the executive committee of the British International History Group and is the part of the editorial team of the *International History Review*. [Read more reviews by Gaynor](#).

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