

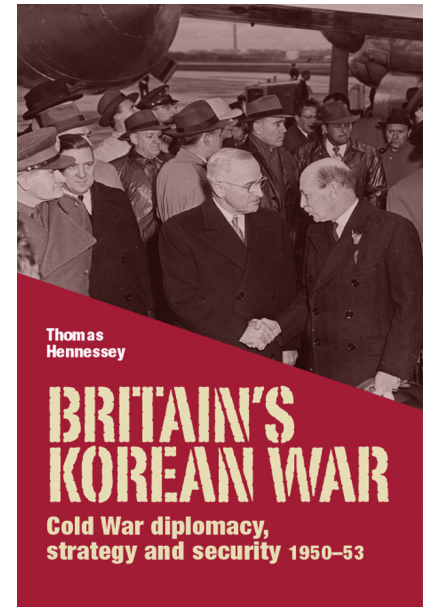
Book Review: Britain's Korean War: Cold War Diplomacy, Strategy and Security, 1950-53 by Thomas Hennessey

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*By the end of the war the British were concerned that it was the Americans, rather than the Soviets, who were the greater threat to world peace. This book sets out to assess the strains within the 'Special Relationship' between London and Washington and aims to offer a new perspective on the limits and successes of British influence. However, **Paul Wingrove** finds that the underplayed authorial viewpoint and interpretation of events leaves the reader uncertain about what new perspective this book brings to our understanding.*

Britain's Korean War: Cold War Diplomacy, Strategy and Security, 1950-53.
Thomas Hennessey. Manchester University Press. November 2013

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This book is an account of the relationship between the USA and the UK during the years of the Korean War, 1950-1953. Whilst the armed forces of both nations were to fight side-by-side against the military forces of North Korea and the 'volunteer' forces of Mao's China following North Korea's invasion of South Korea on June 25th June 1950, there were from the outset substantial and sharp disagreements between the two powers both about the conduct of the war and diplomatic strategy. It was the UK's intent to manage these disagreements whilst seeking to exercise some military and diplomatic influence over a Washington much aroused by 'communist aggression'.

Across 8 chapters, Thomas Hennessey, Professor of Modern British and Irish History at [Canterbury Christ Church University](#), recounts these difficult years in the Anglo-American relationship, using almost exclusively the unpublished documentary records available in the [British National Archives](#) or the published documents available in the Korean war volume of the series [Documents on British Policy Overseas](#) (DBPO), or in the Korean war volumes of the American documentary series [Foreign Relations of the United States](#) (FRUS), all of which provide records of the high-level political discussions, diplomatic traffic and international meetings of these years.

Whilst primary source work on this scale might be admired, an over-concentration on the official documentation has, I feel, produced a work which delivers less than its title might promise. Indeed, the overall impression that this book made on me is of a history with perhaps too much of the history left out, if I can so express it. The author delivers a documentary blow-by-blow account (a telegram is sent, a reply is received, a point is made in a meeting, a rejoinder is offered) but too often with insufficient comment or interpretation. This is not wholly devoid of merit as an approach, but it is a rather limited strategy which leaves little room for those elements which would not only provide a more historically complete account, but also a more interesting one.

Personalities, ideologies, bureaucratic politics, domestic political pressures, strategic considerations, cultural traditions – all are part of the historical weave, but are in the main neglected by the author in favour of a straight, and largely uncritical, documentary chronicle. It is noteworthy that several chapters make no reference at all to any sources (diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, biographies, monographs or journal articles – the main ingredients of any historical dish, surely?) beyond

the official documentary record, and other chapters show minimal reference to such material, especially American material. Of course, there is much to learn from documents, and to a degree it is helpful to have sight of the wide range of documentation presented here, but too often the documents are taken at face value and the significance of the telegrams or of the exchanges in meetings is not always well established. Accepting that the author may have a limited purpose – extensive and detailed exposition of the documentary record – I did not feel that the result was the historically rounded, convincing and engaging explanation of these years of sharp Anglo-American tension and disagreement which I had anticipated.

We should remember that there were moments of very significant disagreement between the UK and the USA, of high tension – even drama – but they turn out very understated in this book (the records of the Attlee-Truman meetings of December 1950 could almost be made into a play. Some parts of the record of the formal sessions can be found between pages 1361 and 1475 of the relevant FRUS volume [here](#). As an example of what can be done – although it is focussed on the US response to North Korean attack – one might look at Rosemary Foot's *The Wrong War* - a rich, thoughtful, multi-faceted interpretation of that response. In Hennessey's book the documents are, to a degree, left to speak for themselves – which document rarely do, of course. The voice of the author necessarily will be heard both in his selection of the texts that he works with and the use that he makes of the material contained within them, and I confess that there were a few occasions when I could not see the author's perspective on either of these matters. Thus, for example, he does not refer to the discussions in the first, important, British cabinet meeting after the outbreak of the war, held on June 27th 1950, just two days after the North Korean invasion. And there is an account of the fifth meeting (of six formal meetings) between Prime Minister Attlee and President Truman held in Washington in December 1950, where the author ignores almost all of the very significant exchanges and disagreements, before turning his attention to the issue of the use of atomic weapons, which – although important – was raised (as the author rightly notes) only at the very end of the meeting (and, incidentally, footnote 33 seems to point to the wrong document here). These few examples raised, in my own mind, some doubts over the completeness of the account offered by Hennessey.

I was also concerned that the author relies too much for any professional academic comfort on reproducing (with minimal changes for person or tense) the words of documents as his own (the source may be referenced but the words do not appear inside quotation marks, or a whole sentence may be reproduced of which only some of the words appear inside quotation marks). This is apparent, I should note, only as regards the published documentation which I have been able to consult (DBPO and FRUS), and which is the smaller part of the source-base for this book. I did not attempt to judge in respect of the unpublished material held in archives, which is the author's major source.

In the end, the underplayed authorial viewpoint and interpretation of events leaves the reader uncertain about what new perspective, if any, this book brings to our understanding of events. It may be that the author intended no more than to lay out a document-led account of the history, in which case this volume has some value, but it needs to be read with care and with a critical eye. Some factual and editorial errors are apparent throughout the text, and this reviewer can't help feeling that the publisher could have tidied up the manuscript before final publication.

Paul Wingrove was formerly Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Greenwich. [Read more reviews by Paul](#) .