origins of Soviet biological weapons research—developments that took place during and after World War II, including scientific and industrial achievements as well as a brief discussion connecting this history to post-Soviet Russian BW activities. Rimmington’s narrative merits a close reading, not least because of the large number of individuals involved, the various and changing names of Soviet research efforts and facilities, and the sheer complexity of the history being explored. Various organizational and bacteriological acronyms also contribute to this density—a table of abbreviations would have been a helpful addition to the book. Rimmington fails to accomplish only one of his stated objectives—demonstrating the potential of Stalin’s BW program to “shed much light” on how modern states might secretly be engaging in similar activities (p. 2)—apart from discussing government totalitarian controls (p. 57) and safety failures (pp. 67–68). This omission aside, Rimmington succeeds in bringing detailed focus to the early period of Soviet BW research, highlighting Stalin’s role, and explaining the German-Soviet standoff over the deployment of biological weapons during World War II (pp. 39–56, 56–63, 137–174).

Finally, Rimmington brings the narrative forward to consider later developments, Stalin’s legacy, and even current Russian military biological research. This coverage, though brief, highlights post–World War II developments (pp. 176–186); scientific and industrial achievements, including a live culture anthrax vaccine reported to be more effective than non-live U.S. or British vaccines (pp. 187–202); and Stalin’s legacy in the current Russian BW effort (pp. 203–206). Rimmington observes that, in addition to the Soviet offensive weapons program, Stalin’s legacy can still be observed. Almost the entire core military BW infrastructure created during the time of his leadership remains in place today. Moreover, the three BW facilities Stalin established at Kirov, Ekaterinburg, and Sergiev Posad remain in “full operation,” along with a Stalin-era veterinary anthrax vaccine facility (pp. 204–206).

Detailed coverage of later Soviet BW activities is beyond the scope of Rimmington’s book and is, as he points out, well documented (pp. 1, 205). Rimmington succeeds in shifting the focus to an earlier period in Soviet history, examining the fragmented and reactive roots of Soviet BW research, and highlighting the integral roles played by similar German efforts and by Stalin himself. Thorough and well researched, this book presents a detailed overview of early Soviet BW activities, as well as the chaotic and harsh environment in which these activities developed.


Reviewed by Radoslav Yordanov, Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University

A region buffeted by great-power and local rivalries, the Balkans has long been synonymous with cultural, political, and territorial fragmentation. The complexity of this
small, diverse region, sitting on the crossroads between past and present and East and West, can be daunting for outsiders. Best known for his epic tale of a bridge that both spatially united the inhabitants of a small Bosnian town and divided them over their past, Ivo Andrić—the Yugoslav diplomat-turned-Nobel-Prize-winning literary icon—suggests that understanding the Balkans is like discovering a fish on a tree by looking at the sky in a creek (“Tko nije naučio gledati nebo u potoku, ne zna što su ribe na drveću”).

Accordingly, the role of the Balkans in the Cold War can be interpreted in similar dialectic terms—the Balkans in the Cold War versus the Cold War in the Balkans. Local, regional, and global dimensions of the conflict are highlighted in this collection of fifteen essays. The volume seeks to determine whether the Cold War in the Balkans outweighed or was reinforced by local and regional factors. Instead of engaging in a futile chicken-and-egg debate, the authors mostly indicate that “superpower supremacy, Cold War strategic dilemmas or ideological cleavages” and “regional pressures” proved equally decisive (p. xx). In underlining this synergetic connection, the essays in the volume employ multiple levels of analysis and comparative studies of the impact on the Cold War.

The volume gravitates toward five major themes, applying a mixed chronological-thematic approach. The first part looks at the role of the Truman Doctrine and the Soviet-Yugoslav split. Relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact are the focus of the three essays in the second part the volume. Local states’ uneasy exchanges with the superpowers is covered in the third part. In breaking with Cold War orthodoxy, part four looks at the European Economic Community (EEC) as a major international actor, situated between the superpowers and the Balkan states in the 1970s and 1980s. The editors’ decision to end the volume by focusing on the perennial questions of Balkan identity, culture, and ideology, instead of opening the discussion with them—as the salience of local nationalisms would suggest—represents an original compositional twist, one that corresponds well with Odd Arne Westad’s insightful and thought-provoking conclusion.

The chapters delving into the individual states not only reveal the pertinent dilemmas vis-à-vis their narrowly defined local interests but also hint at the region’s complex broader international standing. Yugoslavia, with its continual attempts to carve its original nonaligned place in the heart of Europe between the two blocs, is a major focus of this volume with as many as seven chapters. The authors discuss various aspects of Yugoslavia’s Cold War history, ranging from the Tito-Stalin split (Mark Kramer) through Belgrade’s role in the Non-Aligned Movement (Svetozar Rajak) to relations with the European Economic Community (Benedetto Zaccaria). Moving across the border—and over the Iron Curtain—Greece, as this volume demonstrates, played an important regional role in at least two respects; namely, through its place in NATO’s strategies against the Soviet bloc (John Iatrides; Eirini Karamouzi); and through its checkered relations with Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Turkey (Iatrides; Spyridon Sfetas). The Turkish government’s attempts to reconcile Turkey’s own internal sociopolitical predicament and its increasing importance in a bipolar world further
enriches this volume’s overall framework through Mehmet Düşемeci’s and Ayşegül Sever’s respective contributions. Their analysis not only pivots on Turkey’s impending ideological cleavages at the cusp of two continents but also contributes to further understanding of the peninsula’s intricate balance of power and its manipulation by external forces.

The connections between the heterogeneous local terrain and the rest of the world bind together the individual case studies. The Warsaw Pact, represented locally by three member-states, Albania (officially a member of the pact until 1968), Bulgaria, and Romania, was, as Laurien Crump suggests, far from monolithic. Bucharest’s and Tirana’s deviations, unlike Sofia’s more orthodox position (see Jordan Baev’s submission), helped turn the Moscow-dominated defense bloc “from a cardboard castle to an increasingly multilateral alliance” (Crump, pp. 151–152). The regional and global dimensions of the Balkans coexisted in a peculiar symbiosis. Furthermore, as Effie Pedaliu’s analysis shows, superpower détente had stimulating effects on local states’ willingness to engage in a détente of their own to avoid being subsumed by great-power agendas (p. 211). On the other hand, Sfetas uses the Macedonian question, which encompassed Yugoslavia, Greece, and Bulgaria, to exemplify how persistent and yet how flexible regional or national problems can be in a broader international context. Building on the intertwined historical and political dynamics, Westad concludes that the Cold War played a useful role for many of the regional powers. The external superpower threat helped maintain alliances and regimes and kept in check long-standing local conflicts.

By presenting in this volume a wealth of case studies and examining interactions between the local and the global, the authors successfully highlight the region’s role in the Cold War. The book, however, devotes much greater attention to Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey than to Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania. Although space limitations naturally required some tradeoffs, the choice of discussed topics skews the coverage toward the Belgrade-Athens-Ankara axis. The uneven coverage bears out the editors’ conviction that a single volume cannot bring out the complexities of the Balkans.

Writing about the Balkans in the Cold War is just as challenging as writing about the Cold War itself. One must make difficult choices about what topics to include and what to leave out. This book leaves untouched a plethora of immensely interesting local phenomena from the final decade of the Cold War that were intimately linked to profound international changes. The reawakening of the voice of civic consciousness; the party-states’ last attempts at social engineering on the ethnonational front; the hasty last-minute reforms of the Warsaw Pact; the USSR’s retreat from the Third World—the list of topics can go on and on. The daunting variety of topics surrounding the main themes of this volume is impressive. The resulting book is as much a valid contribution to several academic fields, such as Balkan studies, Cold War history, and international history, among others, as it is a groundbreaking endeavor that is likely to inspire similar investigations covering topics discussed here as well as those left out.