military forces in Czechoslovakia after 1968 is described as filling a gap “in safeguarding the security of the Eastern European border with Western Europe” (p. 246); in fact, the new Central Group of Forces filled a gap in Soviet war plans that by the late 1960s assumed that Soviet forces would constitute the first echelon of rapid offensive operations into Western Europe.


Reviewed by Philip C. Shackelford, South Arkansas Community College

The origin of the Soviet biological warfare (BW) program was fear. With *Stalin’s Secret Weapon*, Anthony Rimmington casts a revealing light onto one of the Soviet Union’s most closely guarded secrets—the existence of a program (initially multiple efforts) to develop biological weapons and defenses against such weapons. Rimmington maintains that Soviet leaders’ interest in BW was a direct “response to, and extension of” German operations during the First World War. He contends that the research program of the Soviet Central Veterinary Bacteriological Laboratory “closely resembled” that of the military bacteriological laboratory in Berlin. Fear also played a significant and recurring role in hindering Soviet BW research, notably during the Great Terror under Josif Stalin. Many notable and talented scientists were suspected, surveilled, and arrested, some escaping back to relative safety while others were executed or died in captivity (pp. 3, 17, 19).

The role of Stalin himself is an aspect of this history that Rimmington considers important and insufficiently addressed by the existing literature. Rimmington seeks with this book to fill a “significant gap” in the military and scientific history of the Soviet Union, as well as to provide a “deeper understanding” of the global development of BW, supported by newly available source material from the British Secret Intelligence Service and Russian archives. In addition to shedding new light on Stalin’s role in Soviet BW development, Rimmington also believes that the study of the Soviet program can illuminate how modern states might pursue clandestine BW programs, that the Soviet program may have played a role in deterring German use of biological weapons during World War II, and that the Soviet program may have been “much more extensive than previously believed, easily outstripping that of the major Western powers.” Finally, Rimmington wants to present a more “nuanced and balanced” consideration of Ivan Mikahilovich Velikanov, the lead scientist of the Soviet BW program for many years (pp. 1–12, 17–20).

Rimmington achieves his goals for the book. He follows through on his promise to examine the Soviet BW program in considerable detail, with chapters devoted to the origins of the effort, the transition from a defensive focus to research exploring the offensive application of BW, various research facilities that came online during the period of focus, Ivan Velikanov, and—although the book focuses mainly on the
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