

Books Review

A military history of the Cold War, 1944–1962

A military history of the Cold War, 1962–1991

Jonathan M House

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Volume 34 of Campaigns and Commanders Series

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press

2021, 564 pages

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Norman: University of Oklahoma Press

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The Las Vegas Strip is renowned for its legendary casinos and overwhelming buffets. One of the most lavish is that at The Buffet restaurant at the MGM Grand Resorts' Bellagio Hotel and Casino. The Bellagio is a world-renowned manmade wonder, and its twelve eateries are internationally famous. The buffet at The Buffet is just as magnificent as the Bellagio's magnificently expensive suites. The never-ending buffet menu is staggering. From an array of beef steaks to lamb to pork and wild boar to hot snow and Dungeness crab to a large Teppanyaki bar to salmon roe to Tobiko and a sprawling caviar station to mountainous shrimp, ceviche, tabbouleh dishes and trout to a range of pizzas, plus crisp vegetarian and vegan stations and an avalanche of everything sweet. All this for \$50. For about \$24, diners can devour as much house wine, draft beer, mimosas, screwdrivers, margaritas and Bloody Marys as they wish. This is all held together by a nearly sacred gastronomic guru, an executive chef. Jonathan House's two bulging volumes on the military history of the Cold War can be savoured in the same vein.

The chef

When it comes to the Cold War, there are thousands of titles to collect and as many to avoid. One name in the very industrious (commercially driven) world of contemporary history one can always trust is JM House. House (a celebrated historian, formerly of the US Army Command and General Staff College) has co-authored more than eighteen books and stands out as an expert on Soviet military history. His most famous work, *When titans clashed: How the Red Army stopped Hitler*, was co-authored with David Glantz.⁷⁶³ The duo produced various historical analyses of Soviet military strategy. (Glantz wrote or co-authored more than 30 books on the subject, four of which he penned along with House.) Apart from military issues pertinently relating to Russia,

House has dabbled in the histories of different aspects of the defence establishment and from various eras. He is adept at scrutinising tiny topics and embracing mega themes with the same ease.

The very notion of a publication, which covers the military strategies of the entire Cold War, authored by a lone scholar, is to say at the least audacious. Usually, the subtitles of those types of quasi-epics end with "... in pictures". House took it on himself to compose a proper historiographical buffet – and succeeded.

Presenting Jonathan M House's all you can eat Cold War buffet

The main course

The titles are no hyperboles and cover the entire epoch. The one volume sprints through the era 1944–1962 and the other volume reviews 1962–1991.

Being what it is, the author stacks lip-smacking thematic slices with complementary topical links. House explains that one goal of his work is to illustrate the complex ping-pong that takes place between policy and the military. He mixes the gradual changes within the global Cold War ideology with those unforeseen sudden shifts within the in-house politics in the halls of power, together with the evolution in military strategy and breakthroughs surrounding military weapons and overall technologies.

Like any blue-ribbon chef, House seeks equilibrium, otherwise thematic herbs and topical spices could clash. The narrative does not become thematically lopsided or drawn askew by aimless embroidery. With the precision of a sushi chef, House peels away vastly complex topics and splices sinewy themes into digestible clarifications without tempering the historical potency thereof. The author also does not pepper the pot until the reader can take no more; he excels at making the important, but often mundane, fascinating with sprinklings of idiosyncratic facts.

House covers all the overarching Cold War military processes with a satellite instead of a microscope. This is very much a buffet and not an egotistically inspired niche platter of exotic delicacies. The first proper chapter (after having set the contextual table) is entitled 'Origins, interests and forces' and House ends it with that old party treat, the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the last chapters of the second volume ('American renewal', 'Schadenfreude for the Soviets', 'Weapons of mass destruction' and 'Conflicts in the 1980s') House masterfully wraps up the entire saga. He covers tidal events with huge gulps. Moving from era to era and continent to continent, the approach is partly thematic and partly chronological. The author assumes that the reader has some basic historiographical notion of the theme. It is therefore not a step-by-step introduction to the theme, but much rather a sprawling review.

Covering the entire Cold War, spread across two volumes and almost 2 000 pages, is of course still too short to imply a surgically intricate analysis of all facets. The realm of "mega history" is the appropriate notion. It is pointless to remark that, at times, the book sweeps across certain vastly complicated issues. Such a remark is also naturally slightly

biased and depends on the reader's own perceptions of what is of importance or simply fascinating. House, for example, makes mention of the 1973 OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) energy crisis in a very tight single sentence whereas the reviewer would have enjoyed a fatty piece on oil and the Cold War, with its vast military implications. House points out that he leaves clinical diplomatic history to others. Fair enough: that dish is served at a different historiographical eatery. That is a moot point.

Apart from the mere largesse of the spread, there are a few surprises. House is refreshing in that he covers '*Civil Defense and Civil Disorders*'. A vital topic in grasping this theme but one easily overlooked by scholars. This chapter is pure indulgence for the historian with a Cold War palate. It describes, among other aspects, the top-secret government bunkers that fascinate most of us. This includes the one constructed for the US Congress beneath the Greenbrier Hotel in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. The sprawling fallout centre was opulent and encompassed a large, impressive, auditorium (adorned with Americana) where Congressional sessions would resume after a possible nuclear attack, while the mushroom clouds were settling on the ruins of Washington. (The luxury hotel still operates with the enormous bunker open to the public.) The bunker of the Federal Reserve Board was in Virginia and bursting with currency with which to spark a post-apocalyptic economy.

House has the remarkable ability to intersperse familiar historical dishes with scrumptious, largely unknown, factual titbits, without diluting the earnestness of the overall theme at all. It must be noted how the writer succeeds in mixing all the different offerings without any change in tempo or temperament. The books not only reveal House's career-long knowledge of the entire Cold War with its infinite complexities, but also the author's fine penmanship. Apart from academic value, the volumes are a hearty read.

Free range?

Within Cold War historiography, approaches to themes are easily force-fed with some ideological orientation. Outlandish conclusions are easily sugar-coated by the fact that the facts are place. House does not give free range to any deductions but gives a clinical outline for his reasoning. The author's astounding knowledge of the themes enables him to weave together various strands to reach in-depth conclusions.

No vegan or soy alternatives

Carnivore's delight. No revisionist niceties in House's approaches. The issues are confronted with clinical candour instead of trying to re-edit the past with artificial flavouring. Present-day political correctness does not inebriate House's approach in dissecting the realities of the past. He obviously has compassion for his vast historical cast, but does not have any favourites.

All tastes

Forego for a moment that intellectual fast-food joint called Google and indulge in a fine historical buffet. The two volumes reviewed here succeed on different levels. Firstly, it is a solid piece of historical writing and a very insightful read. As a reference work, the books are of use for inexperienced students and highly committed scholars alike. It is very possible to utilise the volumes as the basis of an entire module (both at under- and postgraduate level). It is rather inconceivable that a library (academic or public) that keeps a contemporary history section would not have House's two volumes.

A scrumptious experience – but not cheap. The two volumes costs roughly the same as a plate at the Bellagio's The Buffet.

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ENDNOTES

⁷⁶³ DM Glantz & JM House. *When titans clashed: How the Red Army stopped Hitler*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015.

