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Jonathan M. House, *A Military History of the Cold War, 1944-1962*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2012. Pp. xiv, 546. ISBN 978-0-8061-4262-3.

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A growing body of literature treats the Cold War as something of a “phony war,” a matter of geopolitics or international relations, not military history. In his excellent new *Military History of the Cold War*, Jonathan House (US Army Command and General Staff College) clears up the confusion. He sees the Cold War as just that—a war—during which military events and advances in technology drove the economics and politics of an era. He examines specific military developments for their often underrated impact on the broader conflict. “Cold War insurgencies, for example, did not always have the same outcome. There were successful revolutions (China and Indochina), unsuccessful revolts (Greece, the Philippines, Malaya, and Kenya), and occasionally military failure that nonetheless led to political victory (Algeria)” (xii). A second focus of the book is the relationship between national policy and military action. As House astutely shows, political pressures often compelled world leaders and their military subordinates to seek warlike solutions, for good and ill.

The book’s fifteen chapters are both chronological and at times thematic in structure. In the first chapter, “Prologue: A Tale of Three Cities,” House locates the origins of the Cold War in 1944, before the end of World War II, without ignoring the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union were still allies. He manages this by spotlighting three places on the periphery of the wider conflict: Warsaw, Athens, and Saigon. He describes the bitter military failure of the Warsaw Uprising and the Allies’ inability to affect that result militarily. The crushing of the Polish resistance paved the way for the imminent Soviet takeover. In Athens, the British commitment of 75,000 men (badly needed in Italy) to fight Greek “communists” resolved nothing. Finally, in Saigon, French intransigence and American and British compliance and overreaction foreshadowed the tragedy of Vietnam. Taken together, these three episodes set the stage for military actions and reactions over the next twenty years.

Chapter 2, “Origins, Interests, and Forces,” will bring nonspecialist readers up to speed for the rest of the book by providing a welcome discussion of the USSR’s operational and technological abilities and policies as compared to those of the United States,¹ something too often missing from studies of the Cold War. Chapter 3, “The Greek Civil War,” deals with military operations, furnishing a valuable treatment of an often neglected conflict. The British success in Greece became the model for American relations with communists in Europe.

Chapters 4, “Armed Forces in an Atomic Age,” 8, “European Alliances and Armaments,” and 13, “Nuclear Nightmares,” concern the evolution of armed forces in response to advancements in both conventional and atomic weapons, highlighting the terrible complexity of force development and implementation that military and civilian leaders faced in the post-Korean War world. Again, changes in both Western and Soviet militaries are directly compared. Here and elsewhere in the book, the level of detail and density of acronyms can be overwhelming, but they do not lessen the rewards of close reading. House, in his assessment of the efficacy of Soviet nuclear spying, concludes that, “What Western information did do was to guide the Soviet physicists along the most efficient path to develop a weapon” (99). Chapter 13 considers American and Soviet nuclear planning in the pre-“mutually assured destruction” era.

In chapter 5, “Confrontations and Alliances,” the author describes the clashes between West and East on the evolving front in Central Europe, with special emphasis on the Berlin Crisis. Usually seen as diplomatic emergency, the event’s outcome, House argues, hinged on logistics—the military’s ability to move the

1. In his *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence: U Press of Kansas, 1995), co-authored with David Glantz, House has a masterfully concise and perspicuous discussion of the “Soviet Enigma” in the immediate postwar period.

necessary supplies. Chapters 6 and 7 treat “The Chinese Civil War,” and “The Korean Conflict,” respectively. House has especially instructive observations on Mao Tse-Tung’s fears of American success in Korea: “He was already frustrated that the United States had reversed its policy by interposing naval vessels in the Taiwan Straits, preventing the final defeat of Chiang Kai-shek. To Mao, Korea was another revolutionary war failure that would embolden the United States throughout northeastern Asia; stopping the United States was both a national security imperative and a response to counterrevolution” (185). These two sentences well clarify the Chinese imperative to act in Korea, in the Taiwan straits, and later in Vietnam. Chapter 9, “The Philippines and Taiwan,” examines American involvement in the greater Asian and Pacific sectors of the Cold War map.

Chapter 10, “The Twenty-Year War: France, Indochina, and Algeria,” and 11, “The Decline of Empires,” cover at length the several insurgency movements that preoccupied France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. House gives a full assessment of the impact of the long military struggles in Algeria and Vietnam. The French use of torture in the prosecution of the *guerre révolutionnaire* ended the empire and embittered and divided the army. To win the battle, the French army lost the war. House’s handling of the fighting by the Portuguese in Africa and the Dutch in Indonesia is even more detailed. In all these cases, he makes succinct, penetrating generalizations about the nature of guerrilla war, the most apt being that not all long-fought revolutionary insurgencies succeeded.

Chapters 12, “The United States Enters the Middle East,” and 14, “Four Confrontations, 1960–1962,” treat the expanding American military investments in men, material, and moral commitment in the late 1950s. The United States “entered” the Middle East, House writes, to support Israel and ensure greater regional stability. In chapter 14, he details four separate areas of involvement: U-2 spying, Cuba, Berlin, and Laos. All were cast as issues of security and containment. House correctly asserts that this string of engagements indirectly “ratcheted up” superpower tensions and created the context for the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War.

The fifteenth and final chapter, “The Cuban Missile Crisis,” is devoted the last and most perilous event of the early Cold War. House’s particular contribution here is to set the missile crisis within in the parameters of US and Soviet operational and strategic abilities and goals. He also perceptively outlines the often overlooked damage done to relations between political and military leaders in both countries by the course the crisis took: “The two political leaders believed they had performed well ..., achieving a fair settlement and bolstering mutual understanding. Their military advisors were much more critical, not because they wanted war but because they had a professional responsibility to evaluate the military consequences if the other side did not live up to its agreements” (439).

As in any work of such broad scope, some relevant events and subjects are absent or too briefly touched on. (I for one would have liked more on Soviet and Chinese military capabilities and planning.) But that is a minor complaint about what is now much the best single-volume treatment of the military history of the Cold War to 1962.²

2. Happily, House plans to write a second volume, taking the story to the end of the Cold War.