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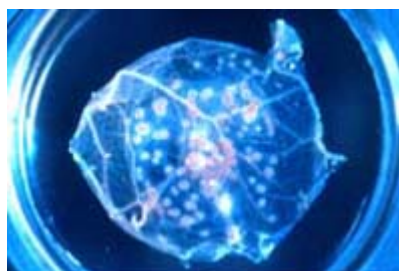
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Silent Weapon: Smallpox and Biological Warfare

By *Colette Flight*

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Colette Flight explains how the weaponisation of smallpox was perfected by the Soviets during the Cold War - and how this biological weapon may still threaten the lives of millions.

Bouquet's blankets

In 1992, a Soviet defector revealed to Western intelligence that he had overseen an extensive, illegal programme to develop smallpox into a highly effective biological weapon.

Britain and the United States were shocked by the revelations. Russia's intent to use biological weapons, they claimed, was morally abhorrent. But a closer look at the history of biological weapons shows that Britain and America both played seminal roles in turning lethal diseases into weapons of war. In fact, Britain was probably the first nation to come up with the idea of using smallpox to kill its adversaries.

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In the 18th century, the British fought France and its Indian allies for possession of what was to become Canada during the French and Indian Wars (1754-63). At the time of the Pontiac rebellion in 1763, Sir Jeffrey Amherst, the Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in North America, wrote to Colonel Henry Bouquet: 'Could it not be contrived to send smallpox among these disaffected tribes of Indians? We must use every stratagem in our power to reduce them.' The colonel replied: 'I will try to inoculate the [Native American tribe] with some blankets that may fall in their hands, and take care not to get the disease myself.' Smallpox decimated the Native Americans, who had never been exposed to the disease before and had no immunity.

It has been alleged that smallpox was also used as a weapon during the American Revolutionary War (1775-83). During the winter of 1775-76, American forces were attempting to free Quebec from British control. After capturing Montreal, it looked as if they might succeed. But in December 1775, the British fort commander reportedly had civilians immunised against the disease and then deliberately sent out to infect the American troops. A few weeks later a major smallpox epidemic broke out in the American ranks, affecting about half of the 10,000 soldiers. They retreated in chaos after burying their dead in mass graves.

World War Two and after

During World War Two, British and American scientists investigated using smallpox as a biological weapon. However, because of the availability of a vaccine, they never felt it was a particularly effective weapon. In November 1969, President Nixon officially halted the US offensive biological weapons programme, bowing to pressure from the American public who had been abhorred by the use of chemical weapons during the Vietnam War.

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In the wake of Nixon's historic abandonment of biological weapons, an international agreement was tabled outlawing their development and

production. In 1972, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Soviet Union all signed up to the Biological Weapons Convention.

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There were more bombshells to come. Dr Kanatjan Alibekov, or Ken Alibek as he is now known, was Chief Scientist at Biopreparat from 1987 to 1992. Ken Alibek's bosses told him that the Americans and British had not given up on biological weapons and were still engaged in their own offensive programmes. He felt his work was justified on these grounds.

Healers and cynics

Ken Alibek started to find discrepancies in the KGB's information and began to have doubts. In December 1991, in exchange for US/UK inspections of a number of Soviet laboratories, a team of Soviet officials was invited to inspect four US facilities. This trip cemented Alibek's concerns. 'A real turning point was when I came to the US and I saw all the so-called BW [bio-warfare] facilities, completely abandoned, not active. I was shocked.'

Alibek defected to America in October 1992 and spent much of the next year being debriefed by CIA officers. His most startling revelation concerned smallpox. He told them how, during the global campaign to eradicate the disease, samples of smallpox taken by Russian doctors had been turned into weapons by the Soviet military. Donald Ainslie Henderson, who led the eradication campaign, felt particularly betrayed by this.

'The Russians themselves had proposed the global eradication programme back in 1958. They had pledged to provide 25 million doses of vaccine every year to the programme. If we hadn't had that amount of vaccine we could never have succeeded.' Alibek claims the Kremlin had a clear understanding that if smallpox was eradicated, and vaccination ended, the virus had the potential to be 'the most powerful and effective weapon ever created to eliminate human life'.



Ken Alibek ©

According to Alibek, one particularly virulent strain, India 67 or India 1, was chosen by the Russians to be weaponised. They perfected techniques for mass producing smallpox and maintained a rolling annual stockpile of hundreds of tonnes. They also developed ways to disseminate the virus in aerial bombs and ballistic missile warheads. Additional work was done to enhance the virulence of the virus and to combine it with other viruses.

The new threat

Ken Alibek believes that, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, unemployed or badly-paid scientists are likely to have sold samples of smallpox clandestinely and gone to work in rogue states engaged in illicit biological weapons development. DA Henderson agrees that this is a plausible scenario and is upset by the legacy it leaves. 'If the [Russian bio-weapons] programme had not taken place we would not I think be worrying about smallpox in the same way. One can feel extremely bitter and extremely angry about this because I think they've subjected the entire world to a risk which was totally unnecessary.'

As the world found to its cost on 11 September 2001, no possibility can ever be ruled out.

But this may not be the only source of the virus. Unrecorded samples left over from the time when the disease was endemic may still exist in other countries. In 1984, when the world's remaining smallpox samples were moved to two high security laboratories in Russia and America, no inspections were carried out to verify that other countries had destroyed their stocks of the virus. As Henderson says, it would have been an impossible task: 'To try to identify what there might be in anybody's deep freeze is a real problem.'

There is no hard evidence, but in Alibek's opinion, 'there are many non-official stocks of smallpox virus'. Western intelligence agencies also believe, based on circumstantial and anecdotal evidence, that three countries - North Korea, Iraq and Russia - currently have the capacity to deploy smallpox as a weapon of mass destruction. Other countries that are suspected of having inadvertently or deliberately retained specimens of the virus include China, Cuba, India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan and Yugoslavia.

It is difficult to assess the real nature of the threat from smallpox from this evidence. Why anyone would wish to use a disease which could lead to the indiscriminate killing of millions as a weapon is difficult to gauge. However, as the world found to its cost on 11 September 2001, no possibility can ever be ruled out.

Find out more

Books

Scourge: The Once and Future Threat of Smallpox by Jonathan B Tucker (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001)

Biohazard by Ken Alibek (Random House, 1999)

About the author

Collette Flight was an Assistant Producer on *Smallpox 2002 - Silent Weapon*, a WalltoWall production for BBC Current Affairs.