



## *Stalin's Secret Weapon: The Origins of Soviet Biological Warfare*

by Anthony Rimmington.

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In response to a history of invasions, the Soviet government, and before it the Russian imperial regime, had a near-paranoid fear of foreign attack in various forms. One consequence of this worldview was that, despite its ratification of the 1925 Geneva Protocol and the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, the Soviet Union continued to devote resources to developing biological weapons. While Western governments judged such weapons to be both immoral and uncontrollable, the USSR's preoccupation with security prompted it to experiment with and even employ toxins and bacteria against perceived foes. This program almost certainly survives in present-day Russia.

In his new book, life scientist Anthony Rimmington (Univ. of Birmingham) traces these weapons programs from their origins to the death of Joseph Stalin and beyond. He uses published Russian sources and declassified British and American intelligence reports to describe known and suspected Soviet centers that developed, tested, and manufactured biological weapons and defenses against them. One chapter, for example, focuses on research done at the former Orthodox convent at Suzdal, an isolated site 130 miles northeast of Moscow; another recounts the work of Ivan Mikhailovich Velikanov, the leading biological warfare scientist of the interwar period. Despite the inconclusive nature of his evidence, Rimmington adroitly links seemingly disparate elements into a coherent general account of his subject.

The author acknowledges that he could not always prove or disprove certain allegations. For example, he speculates that the limited evidence of a Leningrad center for research on typhus and other diseases suggests that the great purges were so thorough as to erase the government's institutional memory of it (125–28). Similarly, he disputes claims by others, including Ken Alibek,<sup>1</sup> that the severe outbreaks of rodent-borne tularemia outside Stalingrad in 1942 were deliberate acts of germ warfare. Instead, he writes that they may have resulted from the wartime lapse of rodent control measures. After all, there is evidence of rats with tularemia infecting Soviet soldiers and airmen as well as mice immobilizing German vehicles by chewing the insulation off electrical wiring.<sup>2</sup>

Rimmington withholds judgment about the necessity or morality of Stalin's biological programs, but identifies several biological attacks by foreign adversaries that would justify Soviet concerns. Germany reputedly tried to spread anthrax among Russian animals during and after World War I. So, too, Japan's infamous Unit 731, which tested biological weapons on Chinese and other prisoners, attempted biological attacks on the Soviet Union in 1939–42, then tried to destroy

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1. See Ken Alibek [pseud. for Kanatzhan Alibekov] and Stephen Handelman, *Biohazard: The Chilling True Story of the Largest Covert Biological Weapons Program in the World—Told from the Inside by the Man Who Ran It* (London: Arrow Books, 1999).

2. Paul Carell, *Stalingrad: The Defeat of the German 6th Army*, trans. David Johnston (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 1993) 154–55.

its records when the Red Army invaded Manchuria in 1945. The author notes that the relatively light postwar sentences of captured Japanese personnel accused of these crimes indicate that both the USSR and the United States may have granted them immunity in return for information about their research (172). Between the two world wars, Germany and the Soviet Union collaborated on biological warfare until each began to fear a possible attack by the other.

The widespread, sometimes slipshod weaponization of diseases by Soviet military and civilian researchers had lethal unintended consequences as early as 1930:

The research supervised by [Efim L.] Demikhovskii led directly to the deaths of two laboratory assistants, Konakova and Lobova; possibly the first human fatalities to have resulted from the Soviet offensive biological weapons programme. Their deaths were the result of an experiment commissioned by Fishman, head of the Military Chemistry [Ninth] Directorate. Fishman was convinced of the strategic value of employing a combination of chemical and biological agents. According to Demikhovskii, hundreds of doves, maintained in a wire cage in the Ninth Department's vivarium, were infected cutaneously with anthrax spores in a phenol solution. The dust thrown up into the air by the flying doves is reported to have caused the laboratory assistants to become infected. (30–31)

This was not, Rimmington notes, the only instance of poor isolation procedures. In late 1939, the deputy director of one research institute became infected while testing a plague immunization and then traveled to Moscow, where he fatally infected two other people (67–68). In 1979, a facility near Sverdlovsk inadvertently released an aerosol of anthrax, forcing a mass inoculation of the local population (193). Although histories of the Cold War abound with stories of Soviet citizens injured by excessive radiation, instances of biological exposure have rarely come to light.

The author also dedicates a chapter to assessing the positive contributions of this research, for instance, the development of vaccines against tularemia, anthrax, botulinum, and brucellosis. On the other hand, the Soviets' claims that they mass-produced penicillin for Red Army soldiers obscures the role played by British-supplied technology. Moreover, the Soviets publicized their work on vaccines to blur the line between legitimate medicine and germ warfare.

Anthony Rimmington has written a complex work. He is meticulous in his reconstructions and prudent in his conclusions, but the problematic nature of his sources sometimes makes his study difficult to follow. That said, he assumes no special technical knowledge in his readers. For these reasons, *Stalin's Secret Weapon* is likely to remain the most thorough account of an appalling aspect of the Soviet totalitarian system.