

Russian Capability for Chemical, Biological War

Defenders of American preparations for chemical and biological warfare often cite as a rationale the Soviet Union's CBW programs, although it is not always clear whether they do so out of a prideful determination to overtake and surpass the Russians—if indeed the Russians are ahead—or whether they believe American readiness is necessary to deter a Soviet attack. In either case, the defenders commonly beg the question of what the Russians are up to, physically and politically, in CBW. Here is a run at an answer.

First, the intelligence information made available to CBW practitioners and, recently, to challengers convinces the converted that the Russians are very big in CBW but tends to leave the skeptics cool. One Government man familiar with the intelligence for years says the classified materials "really tell you no more" than the published materials, which—in the specifics—amount mostly to assertions from sources with an ax to grind, such as Army Chemical people or anti-Soviet emigres. Against the Pentagon's standard contention that it cannot disclose its information lest its sources be compromised, must be set the question whether there is any substantial secret information to disclose. Those politicians and writers who might be called on to surface Pentagon-CIA leaks have yet to produce on CBW.

Where documentation ebbs, deduction flows. In international forums, for instance, some Russian (and Czech and Polish) scientists have shown an expertise and "feel" consistent with CW work—both in its technology and in the mechanisms and methodology of its employment, one qualified source reports. Russia and East Europe have high ratings in microbiology and chemistry. Years ago the Russians developed a "superb" vaccine for tularemia, which is at once a public health problem in the Soviet Union and a BW enterprise in the United States. The basic processes for nerve gas were pioneered by Soviet chemists in the 1930s. Moreover, American scientists in a position to know have found their Soviet colleagues as passionately opposed to CBW as themselves.

The various kinds of evidence lead one high-level and seemingly disinterested source to believe that the Russians have a strong CW capability but perhaps only a modest BW capability. As to how these pro-

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grams compare to the United States' own, the question appeals chiefly to those who want more money or permissiveness for American programs.

The Army's former research chief, Lt. Gen. Arthur G. Trudeau, said in 1960: "Russian leaders have boasted that they are fully prepared to use new chemical weapons of great significance and we know Soviet forces are trained in their use." That Soviet forces are so trained, "we" do know—from Red Army manuals and organization charts and, evidently, from agent and defector accounts. But that Russian leaders have "boasted" of CW readiness is hyperbole.

Within the last year the American government mounted a crash search for Soviet admissions of a CBW capability. Aside from guarded generalizations which can be read in several ways, only one such admission could be found. Thirty-one years ago the late Marshal Voroshilov said that if Hitler used such weapons, Moscow would reply in kind. In three decades no further admission has been made, although that one is still repeated, most recently a month ago in *New Times*. The public museum at the Edgewood Arsenal displays, among other items, Soviet chemical bombs and mustard-gas shells of World War II vintage—nothing newer.

Only, one gathers, in the most private limited way have those Soviets licensed to discuss CBW with foreigners given any hint of Soviet work in the field. The customary approach is that followed by a Soviet expert at a CW symposium in Stockholm last August. Asked whether he thought CW was usable in mobile as well as static warfare, he said he had to say he was "a dilettante in such matters." Some American specialists wonder if Moscow realizes that its posture not only keeps the United States off balance but enables interested Americans to maintain, unrebuted, that the Soviet CBW capability is immense.

For decades the Soviet government has urged that CBW be outlawed. Its vehicle for this effort has been the Geneva Protocol of 1925, a pledge against use of CBW in war. The Soviet Union quickly ratified it, adding the reservations that it would not be bound in respect to states which did not ratify or honor the treaty. The Russians take the broad view that the Protocol bans

the use in war of all chemical agents, including the nonlethal ones the United States has employed in Vietnam. They have consistently opposed efforts to push the Geneva Protocol out of diplomatic center stage but nonetheless they have indicated some favor for a new British initiative to move beyond the Protocol and to ban the production and possession, as well as the use, of BW agents. BW's extra horror quotient sets it apart from the more accepted and militarily operational CW programs.

Toward verification of any prospective ban on the development, production and stockpiling of CB agents, the Russians maintain their traditional stance that the first requirement is to agree internationally on a ban. Typically, the Soviet member of an international panel which recently submitted a strong anti-CBW report to the United Nations, refused to let the panel write a section on verification.

At the Pugwash meetings of Soviet and American scientists, however, an interesting variation has developed. A modest mutual inspection experiment was devised under which some 14 laboratory inspections have been conducted since 1964 in NATO and Warsaw Pact countries without a CBW capability, such as Denmark and Hungary. Soviet specialists have shown what their American counterparts take as an approving interest in recent American thinking on CB controls, specifically a paper on the technical feasibility of inspecting nerve gas production facilities presented last August in Stockholm by Alan R. Pittaway.

What does all this add up to? The Russians are prepared to conduct CW, probably BW too, but they never have done it and presumably they are extremely reluctant to begin, even in retaliation. They want to lock the legal, political and moral doors opening on CBW as tightly as possible. They are not hobbled in their approaches to arms control, as the United States is, by having refused to ratify the Geneva Protocol, by equivocating on the issue of a no-first-use pledge, and by having used nonlethal chemicals in Vietnam. They seem to be troubled by the relative cheapness and availability of CB agents to underdeveloped countries, especially those whose poverty and acceptance of the nonproliferation treaty have put nuclear weapons out of reach. By example and impetus, the Russians will continue to press the United States very hard for further controls on CBW.