



BOOK REVIEW

BIOHAZARD

The Chilling True Story of the Largest Covert Biological Weapons Program in the World – Told from Inside by the Man Who Ran It

By Ken Alibek and Stephen Handelman

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An international traveler becomes violently ill from what is initially believed to be flu-like symptoms. Within days, other passengers on the same conveyance become ill and seek medical attention. Several succumb to the illness and die. Soon the illness becomes a world-wide pandemic. The pandemic devastates national and international commerce and economies while challenging nation states as they attempt to protect citizens. The situation is further exacerbated by the fact the pathogen triggering this event is new and of unknown origins. Initially attributed to an unsanitary marketplace, it may have been the result of or human engineering. The medical community works diligently to isolate the pathogen, develops vaccines, and begins inoculation but millions die as the surviving world population gradually begins to develop a natural immunity.

How would the global community address an issue such as this and what could be done to prevent a similar event in the future?

To prohibit the development, production, and stockpiling of biological and toxin weapons, in 1972 the United Nations established the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC).¹ The BWC was the first multilateral disarmament treaty that banned this category of weapons of mass destruction. The United States and Russia, then the Soviet Union, ratified the resolution in 1975.² China acceded into the BWC in 1984. Today, the BWC includes 183 states.³

The BWC, seemingly, would make the thought of developing, maintaining, weaponizing and developing delivery systems for biowarfare agents collectively unthinkable. With America's adversaries bound by this agreement, the threat of biological weapons was greatly reduced. The BWC attempts to diminish the danger that bioweapons present to the world. However, could a state signatory of the BWC continue to research, develop, and create biological weapons? The Book BIOHAZARD, The Chilling True Story of the Largest Covert Biological Weapons Program in the World – Told from Inside by the Man Who Ran It,⁴ answers this question with a resounding, frightening, and unequivocal "YES!"

"...biological agents... are almost impossible to detect, which complicates the task of tracing the author of a biological attack. This makes them as suitable for terrorism and crime as for strategic warfare."

- Ken Alibek p.176

After serving as First Deputy Chief of the Soviet Bio-Preparat, the covert Soviet agency responsible for development and production of biological warfare weapons, Dr. Ken Alibek defected to the United States of America in 1992. Upon arriving in the United States, he was alarmed by the level of the western world's ignorance concerning biological weapons. Inspired by his exposure to Soviet biological weapons production and his concern about western misperceptions of this very real threat, Dr. Alibek teamed with Steven Handelman and wrote BIOHAZARD, The Chilling True Story of the Largest Covert

Biological Weapons Program in the World – Told from Inside by the Man Who Ran It, a non-fiction book published in 2000. Although the book is not new, recent epidemic events and the rapid spread of inexpensive, dual-use, easy to make, easy to use, and difficult to attribute bioweapons technology make the examination of this subject matter more relevant than ever.

In 21 chapters, spread across approximately 300 pages and including two appendices describing the structure and composition of the Soviet Biological Warfare System, Dr. Alibek provides a compelling and intriguing look at the former Soviet Union's deliberate clandestine program to develop the capacity and capability to deliver biological weapons of mass destruction. Even more riveting is that the Soviets were successful in producing agents with enough quantity and stability to make employment using intercontinental missiles as a delivery mechanism achievable!

As the organizational leader and the Soviet's subject matter expert in all aspects of bioweapons development including selection, acquisition, characterization, weaponization, production, and delivery configuration of biological agents including anthrax, plague, tularemia, smallpox, and Marburg, Dr. Alibek provides a detailed and sobering first-hand account of deliberate and massive violations of the Biological Weapons Convention. His account provides a level of verisimilitude to the frailty, insufficiency, and ambiguities inherent to treaties.

For individuals interested in the inner workings of the former Soviet Union's communist bureaucracy, Dr. Alibek provides a behind-the-curtain look at the Soviet state security apparatus as he describes his intricate navigation of a system rife with overlapping layers of control, enforcement, and distrust. For individuals involved in the design, development, and monitoring of international treaties and conventions, Dr. Alibek's participation in the development of plans and actions to deliberately cover up, deceive, and provide misinformation while hosting inspection visits of representatives from the United States and Great Britain participating in tri-lateral visits to suspected Soviet Biowarfare production facilities will be a great value.

Biohazard is both fascinating and enthralling and a 'must read' for all members of the CWMD enterprise as it addresses subject matter directly related to a very real and constantly evolving threat. I recommend "Biohazard" to all readers with additional emphasis for professionals involved in biological warfare strategy. While some knowledge of biology and disease

agents might be useful in better understanding the development and production processes outlined in the book, specialized knowledge is not necessary to appreciate the scale and detail of clandestine Soviet biological weapons development and production. •

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Notes

1. United Nations, Office for Disarmament Affairs Treaties Database, "Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction," accessed March 11, 2024, <https://treaties.unoda.org/t/bwc>.

2. Arms Control Association, "Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)," accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/treaties/biological-weapons-convention>.

3. Arms Control Association, "Biological Weapons Convention Signatories and States-Parties," accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/bwcsig>.

4. Ken Alibek 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*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 2000).