

# Bioterrorism—Hell or Hype?

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

Ken Alibek with Stephen Handelman

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**W**hy the sudden interest in bioterrorism? Isn't it the latest, far-fetched hype? Has there ever been any use of biological weapons?

Yes, right here, and not too long ago. It was in 1763, in Pennsylvania, during the final year of the French and Indian War. There was an outbreak of smallpox at Fort Pitt. Sir Jeffrey Amherst, the commander-in-chief of the British troops in North America, then encouraged the deliberate use of smallpox to eradicate the American Indians. He wrote to Colonel Henry Bouquet about it. The correspondence is accessible because the US Library of Congress microfilmed it during World War II. Today, these letters are displayed on the Internet.

Colonel Bouquet was quite aware that biological weapons can backfire: "I will try to inoculate the(m) . . . with some blankets that may fall into their hands, and take care not to get the disease myself." The Pittsburgh militia leader, William Trent, kept a journal of the actual events. His entry on May 24, 1763, describes a meeting with Turtles Heart, the principal warrior of the Delawares, and Chief Mamattee: ". . . we gave them two blankets and a handkerchief out of the smallpox hospital. I hope it will have the desired effect." The

deed was done and the results were devastating. A lethal smallpox epidemic spread among susceptible natives, first along the Ohio River, then toward the plains, across the Rocky Mountains to the West, and ultimately from Southern California to Alaska. It must have been hell.

But wasn't that more than 200 years ago? In June 2000, eight children in Vladivostok came down with fever and severe pustular rashes. At play, they had found some ampoules, debris from a lab. According to the Russian NTV television, discarded boxes were strewn over a wide area. The vials contained smallpox vaccine, and the children came down with vaccinia—cowpox. Were those vials a fallout from Russia's former biological weapons program? That massive effort is described in Ken Alibek's book *Biohazard: The Chilling True Story of the Largest Biological Weapons Program in the World Told from the Inside by the Man Who Ran It*.

After graduating from the Tomsk Medical Institute in 1975, Kanatjan Alibekov joined the Soviet army. He was assigned to biological weapons development. Through several successful assignments, he rose to the rank of colonel and deputy director of Biopreparat, the bioweapon production agency of the USSR. He describes the stations of his

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career, until the disintegration of the USSR, Gorbachev's stepping from power in 1991, and his own resignation from the army in January 1992.

Alibekov rejected a request to start a bioweapons program for his homeland, Kazakhstan. While some fellow scientists had set up private pharmaceutical companies or became consultants for other nations, he preferred to work as a banker. He claims that his former employers considered him a man who knew too much and warned him. During an official visit to the US in December 1991 he had made contacts. He explains that his quarrels with authorities in Russia as well as his homeland left him little choice. In October 1992 he smuggled his family out of Russia and made his knowledge available to US agencies. After a thorough debriefing, he found a role in the US biodefense industry. He changed his name to Ken Alibek, much like the conversion of Saul to Paul.

Alibek mentions his personal success developing a tularemia weapon and details his other assignments. Most shocking is his report on production capacities and stockpiles. The USSR replenished and maintained 20 tons of smallpox agent. In 1987 it could produce nearly 5,000 tons of anthrax a year.

The book describes the accidental release of anthrax in Sverdlovsk. It occurred in 1979, when workers failed to replace a clogged exhaust filter late one Friday night. Shift workers at a factory downwind, across a river, were exposed and developed pulmonary anthrax. Later, official reports claimed that 96 people were stricken with the disease, and 66 died.

Alibek's book jumps back and forth in time. While this creates dramatic effect, I find this technique distracting.

Nevertheless, one can distill several important messages. "Americans believed that Russia's biological weaponry no longer constituted a significant threat. Slowly and reluctantly, I have come to believe they were wrong." This threat has several dimensions:

- Bioweapons specialists in Russia have now turned their attention to peaceful projects; however, while production facilities have been dismantled, the human resources and the organizational structure are still in place. "If we were to dismantle a significant portion of our production facilities, maybe we could preserve our research programs. If circumstances required, we could always recover our strength."
- Several private enterprises have appeared offering seed stock and expertise.
- The bioweapons program has left an environmental impact hard to assess. The children mentioned in the recent press release provide a sad illustration.

In 1980 French police caught the Red Army Faction culturing clostridium botulinum. In 1984 the Rajneeshee cult contaminated salad bars in Oregon restaurants with salmonella, causing 751 cases of enteritis. Forty-five people needed to be hospitalized. In 1995 the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo attempted to spray anthrax and botulinum toxin in central Tokyo, until they finally used the nerve gas sarin in the subway, killing 12 and injuring 5,000. Bioweapons are real, and bioterrorism is no hype. Thanks for the heads-up, Dr. Alibek.

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