Smallpox Biological Warfare

The British considered using smallpox as a biological warfare agent during the French and Indian Wars (1754–63), against France and its Native American allies at the Siege of Fort Pitt. On one occasion in June 1763, two blankets and a handkerchief that had been exposed to smallpox were given to representatives of the besieging Delawares with the aim of spreading the disease and ending the siege. Historians do not agree on whether this effort to broadcast the disease was successful. It has also been alleged that smallpox was used as a weapon during the American Revolutionary War (1775–83).

During World War II, scientists from the United Kingdom, United States and Japan were involved in research into producing a biological weapon from smallpox. Plans of large scale production were never carried through as they considered that the weapon would not be very effective due to the wide-scale availability of a vaccine.

In 1947 the Soviet Union established a smallpox weapons factory in the city of Zagorsk, 75 km to the northeast of Moscow.. An outbreak of weaponized smallpox possibly occurred during testing at the factory in the 1970s. General Prof. Peter Burgasov, former Chief Sanitary Physician of the Soviet Army, and a senior researcher within the Soviet program of biological weapons described the incident:

> "On Vozrozhdeniya Island in the Aral Sea, the strongest recipes of smallpox were tested. Suddenly I was informed that there were mysterious cases of mortalities in Aralsk. A research ship of the Aral fleet came to within 15 km of the island (it was forbidden to come any closer than 40 km). The lab technician of this ship took samples of plankton twice a day from the top deck. The smallpox formulation—400 gr. of which was exploded on the island—"got her" and she became infected. After returning home to Aralsk, she infected several people including children. All of them died. I suspected the reason for this and called the Chief of General Staff of Ministry of Defense and requested to forbid the stop of the Alma-Ata—Moscow train in Aralsk. As a result, the epidemic around the country was prevented. I called Andropov, who at that time was Chief of KGB, and informed him of the exclusive recipe of smallpox obtained on Vozrazhdenie Island."

Others contend that the first patient may have contracted the disease while visiting Uyaly or Komsomolsk, two cities where the boat docked.

Responding to international pressures, in 1991 the Soviet government allowed a joint US-British inspection team to tour four of its main weapons facilities at Biopreparat. The inspectors were met with evasion and denials from the Soviet scientists, and were eventually ordered out of the facility. In 1992 Soviet defector Ken Alibek confirmed that the Soviet bioweapons program at Zagorsk had produced a large stockpile—as much as twenty tons—of weaponized smallpox (possibly engineered to resist vaccines), along with refrigerated warheads to deliver it. It is not known whether these stockpiles still exist in Russia. In 1997, however, the Russian government announced that all of its remaining smallpox samples would be moved to the Vector Institute in Koltsovo. With the breakup of the Soviet Union and unemployment of many of the weapons program's scientists, there is concern that smallpox and the expertise to weaponize it may have become available to other governments or terrorist groups who might wish to use virus as means of biological warfare.

Further Reading

- What is Smallpox?
- Smallpox Cause
- Smallpox Evolution
- Smallpox Prognosis
- Smallpox Prevention
- Smallpox Eradication
- Smallpox History
