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BOOK REVIEWS

Britain and Biological Warfare: Expert advice and science policy – 1930-65¹

by
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WHAT CAN YOU SAY to those who say that you can "cook up" biological warfare agents in the kitchen and kill thousands?

Try positioning this account of the nascent British program from before World War II alongside Ken Alibek's account of the Soviet program (as told in *Biohazard* from Random House). What comes through such a comparison is the need to commit huge resources to make it work and, in the case of the British program, not necessarily succeed.

Brian Balmer's account is based on documents, now publicly accessible, from various United Kingdom committees over a thirty-five-year period. Anyone with familiarity with bureaucratic processes and Yes Minister will find familiar themes here. Repeated delays for approval, policy vacuums and funding shortfalls all loom large in the slow progress over these years. In contrast to the Soviet program of the late 20th Century, the account of British development suggests considerable ambivalence about offensive research and weapons development as well as the gradual drift away from this area of focus. Perhaps it is heartening that the UK program failed to receive such investment and was re-directed into defensive issues because it suggests that the backyard terrorist is unlikely to succeed in causing mass casualties.

From the historical perspective, this account reminds us that networks such as the UK Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) were developed to counter the effects of disease agents during the war. The same parallel exists in the United States where the Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) was established in the Cold War to counter the use of biological warfare and continues as part of the CDC today. These services have come to the forefront again as the terrorist threat is re-examined internationally and public health brought back into "the loop" again; Pitts can change! This account is worth a dip just to remind ourselves that we can still learn from history.

1. This book was reviewed by Dr Michael Hills in *Aus Mil Med* 2002; 11 (1):44.
2. Balmer Brian. *Britain and Biological Warfare: Expert advice and science policy – 1930-65*. Houndmills: Palgrave; 2001. ISBN 0-333-75430-1.