

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

23 – *Biohazard*

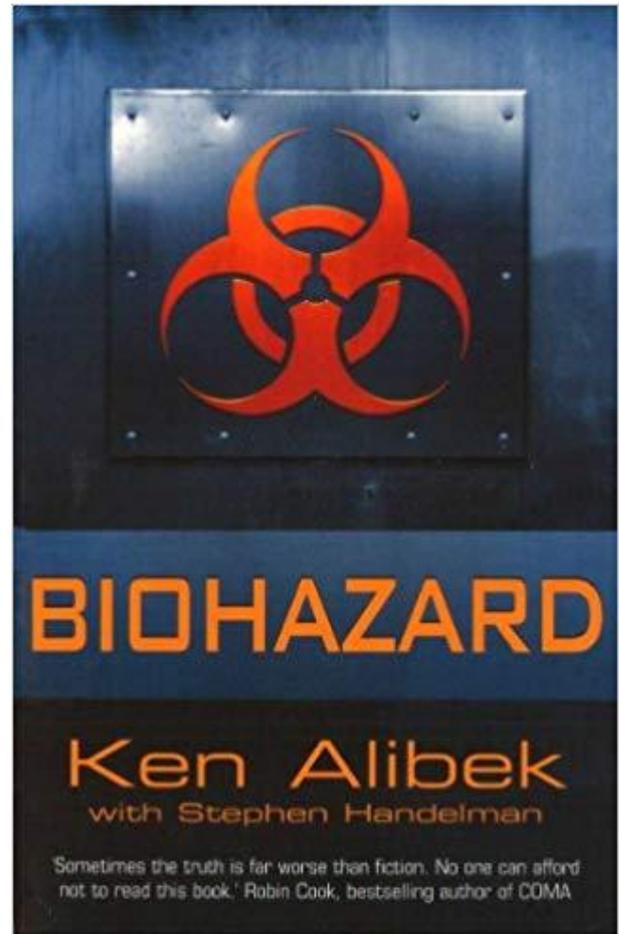
BIOHAZARD – the chilling true story of the largest biological weapons program in the world, told by the man who ran it

Author: Ken Alibek (with Stephen Handelman)

Publication info: Dell/[Random House](#), 1999
(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

Descriptor: how the Soviet Union secretly ignored every biological and chemical weapons limitation treaty it signed up to and created by far the world's largest bio-industrial weapons complex

Reviewer: Ian Mitchell, 9 November 2018



Reason to read: Anyone who has any lingering doubts about who was responsible for the Skrypal poisoning should read this exposé of the Soviet biological weapons programme and the *completely* amoral and unscrupulous way it was run, right up to, and including, the time of perestroika. “In 1988, Gorbachev signed a decree ordering the development of mobile production equipment to keep our weapons assembly lines one step ahead of inspectors.” (p. 145) This approach continued under Yeltsin in only slightly toned-down form. The reader will be able to form his or her own impression from the text as to whether the Soviet capability has been revived as part of Mr Putin’s arms build-up.

Main talking points:

1. “In 1928, the governing Revolutionary Military Council signed a secret decree ordering the transformation of typhus into a battlefield weapon. Three years earlier the fledgling Soviet government had signed an international treaty in Geneva banning the use of poison gas and bacteriological weapons.” (p. 33)
2. There was a mysterious outbreak of tularemia amongst front-line German troops in the months before the Battle of Stalingrad. “Our epidemiological study provided a telling statistic: in 1941, ten thousand cases of tularemia had been reported in the Soviet Union. In the year of the Stalingrad outbreak, the number of cases soared to more than one hundred thousand. In 1943, the incidence of the disease returned to ten thousand.” (p. 30) “An elderly lieutenant colonel

who worked in the secret bacteriological weapons facility in the city of Kirov during the war told me that a tularemia weapon was developed in Kirov in 1941, the year before the Battle of Stalingrad. He left me with no doubt that the weapon had been used... Stalingrad was a test of survival for the Soviet Union. If the city had been lost, the nation's industrial heartland in the Urals would have fallen before the advancing German tanks. More than one million of our soldiers died defending the city... The moral argument for using any available weapon against an enemy threatening us with certain annihilation seemed to me irrefutable. I came away fascinated by the notion that disease could be used as an instrument of war." (p. 31)

3. "Over a twenty-year period that began with Moscow's endorsement of the Biological Weapons Convention in 1972, the Soviet Union built the largest and most advanced biological warfare establishment in the world. We were among the 140 signatures of the convention, pledging 'not to develop, produce stockpile or otherwise acquire or retain' biological agents for offensive military purposes. At the same time, through our covert program, we stockpiled hundreds of tons of anthrax and dozens of tons of plague and smallpox near Moscow and other Russian cities for use against the United States and its Western Allies." (p. x)
4. "500 monkeys were ordered from Africa for tularemia tests on Rebirth Island [in the Aral Sea]... Since we were testing a vaccine-resistant weapon, all of the monkeys had to be immunized before [the test]." (p. 27) "We used to say that the most fortunate inhabitants of the Soviet Union were the condemned monkeys of Rebirth Island. They were fed oranges, apples, bananas and other fresh fruits rarely seen by Soviet citizens. Each piece of fruit was carefully inventoried and guarded to dissuade members of the scientific teams from giving in to temptation. It was acknowledged that our test subjects had to stay healthy until their last breath, while the scientists, who had to subsist on ration of cold porridge and fatty sausage, were expendable." (p. 17)
5. "On [Rebirth] island in the Aral Sea, one hundred monkeys are tethered to posts set in parallel rows stretching out to the horizon... Some 75 feet above the ground, a cloud the colour of dark mustard begins to unfurl, gently dissolving as it glides down towards the monkeys. They pull at their chains and begin to cry. Some bury their heads beneath their legs. A few cover their mouths and their noses, but it is too late: they have already begun to die. At the other end of the island, a handful of men in biological protective suits observe the scene through binoculars, taking notes. In a few hours, they will retrieve the still-breathing monkeys and return them to cages where the animals will be under continuous examination for the next several days until, one by one, they die of anthrax or tularemia, Q fever, brucellosis, glanders, or plague." (p. ix)
6. "The biowarfare program was code-named 'Ecology'." (p. 38)
7. Amongst the viruses and bacteria that Alibek was involved in developing for military use were, in addition to tularemia, the weaponization of which was his passport up the power ladder, anthrax, brucellosis, smallpox, haemorrhagic fever, myelin and various psychotropic agents. One of the most virulent was called Marburg. It was derived from Ebola, found in the Congo. The death of the leading expert on this virus, Nikolai Ustinov ("a gregarious, well-built man with an easy smile and a sharp wit"), after he inadvertently pricked himself with a needle he was using to inject the toxin into some rabbits, is so horrific that I refrain from reproducing it. (pp. 123-144)

Thought(s) provoked: In connection with the Skrypal case, pages 176-78 are instructive. "One of the principle advantages of biological agents is that they are almost impossible to detect, which complicates

the task of tracing the author of a biological attack.” Alibek tells the story of Ivan Kivelidi, an anti-corruption activist and businessman who was murdered in 1995. “Detectives at the murder scene reported that they had discovered an unknown substance on Kivelidi’s office telephone. They identified it as cadmium. The deaths of the businessman and his secretary were then reported as ‘radiation poisoning’, but when I read news reports of the incident, they reminded me of a conversation I had had several years before.... ‘We’ve come up with an interesting new approach,’ he told me with some excitement. ‘Let’s say we spray something on the steering wheel of a car... the driver would either pick up the agent by inhaling or through his skin... It would look like a heart attack.’ I expressed admiration. ‘Oh,’ he waved his hand casually, ‘We’ve developed lots of better stuff.’” (pp. 176-7)

Incidental interest: The first main centre for research into most of these horrific weapons was (is?) the holy city of Zagorsk (now Sergiev Posad). I wonder if, when Margaret Thatcher visited the monastery there and was so impressed by the Orthodox singing, she was aware of the sinister operations being undertaken by secret scientific superstars just a mile or two away?

Surprising points: “The complete recipe for our anthrax weapon filled twelve volumes.” (p. 272)

Negative issue(s): This book was, after all, written in the USA, after Alibek had changed sides.

Style: Concise and fast-paced.

Smile(s): It’s not really that kinda story.

Author: Ken Alibek, a Kazakh, trained as a doctor before being recruited into the bioweapons development programme. He rose to become the deputy head before re resigning in the wake of the August 1991 coup attempt. He then moved to the US, where he works on immunological defence against biological weapons. “In helping my adopted country create a new system of defence against the weapons I once made... I have come to the conclusion that I did not betray Russia so much as it has betrayed its people.... We talk of economic and structural reform, but what is needed in Russia is moral reform. Until that happens, Russia will not change.” (p. 292)

Link(s): Here you can see Alibek discussing issues arising from those covered in his book two years after publication: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?166818-4/anthrax-bioweapons> His comments at about minutes 8-9 about why he left for the United States are particularly interesting. Here is a shocking account of Soviet bioweapons by another scientist: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpz-f-DgDK4>

Overall recommendation level: HIGH

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a multi-volume study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*. He lives in Campbeltown and can be contacted at ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see: <https://www.moffatrussianconferences.com/ian-mitchell-s-russia>