

Geneva, 12 August 1980

Ambassador V.I. Israelyan
Head of the USSR Delegation to the Committee
on Disarmament
4, chemin du Champ de Ble
1292 Chambosy
Geneva

Dear Ambassador Israelyan,

... I enclose a copy of an article from the New Scientist, a widely circulated and respected British publication, which casts further considerable doubt on the allegations of the USA concerning BW.

May I refer to my letter of 30 June concerning a possible meeting of scientists under Pugwash auspices to discuss the BW question. It is likely that this matter will be raised at the 30th Pugwash Conference in the Netherlands scheduled to start on 20 August. I will leave Geneva on 16 August for meetings of our Executive Committee and Council which will precede the Conference. It would be helpful if before my departure you would let me have any reaction to the suggestion in my letter of 30 June. I might add that I believe any objective assessment and statement concerning the information available by a group of scientists of the east and west, and not those necessarily listed in my letter, would be of considerable value in neutralizing the harm engendered by the allegations referred to above.

Yours sincerely,

M.M. Kaplan
Director-General

*Matt,
Julian is preparing a short paper
discussion in Holland. I'll telephone you
before I leave Geneva.*

cc: London office)
Prof. Meselson) with enclosure

The great Russian germ war fiasco

Was it really a military accident that spread anthrax over Sverdlovsk?

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In May this year I received a letter from the director of the Federation of American Scientists, Dr Jeremy J. Stone, in which he asked me to express "any ideas about the attached issue of a Soviet anthrax incident". I wrote back giving him my opinion on the anthrax story. I did not then see the need to write an article on the subject. The case was already in the hands of the CIA; the "attached issue" referred to by Stone was a press release from the US Senate of 16 April, 1980, on the intention to prepare the "Soviet Biological Warfare Resolution". I was sure that the CIA had many more resources than I did to find out all the details of the Sverdlovsk incident. However, recent reports indicate that the public version of the Sverdlovsk epidemic has contributed to the decision by the US House of Representatives to pass a resolution to start some work on the production of a so-called binary chemical weapon. This made me reconsider my initial passive attitude. I realised that even my limited knowledge about the background of the Sverdlovsk anthrax story might be of some interest to the public here and probably even to the CIA, which, as I found earlier from the CIA files on the 1953 Urals nuclear disaster, is not always able to assess information about the USSR correctly.

The story that there had been an outbreak of anthrax in Sverdlovsk became headline news in many Western newspapers on 19 March this year. David Passage, an official spokesman from the US State Department, had stated at a press conference the previous day that an "outbreak of disease" in Sverdlovsk, a city of 1.2 million people, had raised questions whether the Soviet Union had violated the terms of a 1975 convention that bans the development, production or stockpiling of biological agents or toxins. The United States has recently expressed concern to the Soviet Union about these reports. This statement was based, not on intelligence information, but on two articles, the first published in *Now!* magazine on 26 October, 1979, and the second published in *Bild Zeitung* of Hamburg, a sensational tabloid, on 13 February, 1980.

The US State Department statement contained no new information apart from what had been published in *Now!* and *Bild Zeitung*. Neither *Now!* nor *Bild* was the first to report their stories. In both cases the "sensation" appeared originally in an obscure Russian-language emigré magazine *Possev* published in Frankfurt. *Possev* (the word means "sowing" in Russian) is the paper of the NTS (the People-Workers' Alliance), which was founded in 1930 as a revolutionary anti-Soviet emigré group.

At the beginning of October 1979, *Possev* published a short unsigned story about an alleged bacteriological accident in Novosibirsk during the spring of 1979. According to this story, several thousands died of a mysterious disease. The escape of the bacteria was associated with secret research facilities near a suburb called Uktus.

On 26 October, 1979, this same story reappeared in *Now!* as a major cover story. There was no mention yet that the disease was a form of anthrax. David Floyd added some details trying to connect the disaster with the alleged secret bacteriological institute established in the Siberian Branch of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR "which is headed by Dr Knorre, a corresponding member of the Academy, and Dr Solganik, a specialist in molecular biology". Akademgorodok, the science town near Novosibirsk where this institute was established, was described by Floyd as "a closed science town where much of the

academy's most secret research work is done". When I read the article I telephoned the science correspondent of *Now!* and told him that the published information was wrong. It is well known that Akademgorodok is not a "closed town", but an open international research centre visited by many foreign scientists. Novosibirsk is also open to foreign tourists. Dr D. G. Knorre and Dr R. Salganik cannot be directors of the bacteriological institute: Knorre is head of the nucleic acid laboratory of the institute of organic chemistry; and Salganik is a deputy director of the institute of cytology and genetics in Novosibirsk. Knorre is also an editor of the international journal *FEBS Letters*, while Salganik is a member of some international biochemical and cell biology committees; they both often travel abroad.

I received no explanation from *Now!* for this part of its article, but I found the source in another emigré Russian language publication *Russkaya Mysl* (Russian Thought). In an article on Academician Yu Ovchinnikov, an emigré writer, Mark Popovsky, had made the same statement as Floyd about Knorre and Salganik.

At the beginning of January 1980, *Possev* published a more detailed story. This time, however, it was about a *Sverdlovsk accident*. The author, N.N., reported that there had been rumours in Sverdlovsk about an outbreak of anthrax ("Siberian ulcer") resulting from an explosion in the nearby military settlement, Number 19, south-west of Sverdlovsk. The cloud of anthrax bacteria was carried by the north wind over Kashino village. The first deaths were registered on 4 April. Afterwards some 30 to 40 people were dying per day for the next month.

Some details about the accident, although based on secondhand rumours, gave the impression that something really had happened in Sverdlovsk, probably a localised anthrax epidemic. Vaccination was carried out in only one suburb of Sverdlovsk. Other parts of the story were clearly false. N.N., for example, wrote that people could not get the bodies of their dead relatives for the funerals (this could well be the case as anthrax victims have to be cremated), but instead were given symbolic "empty coffins". The bacteria strain was indicated to be either V-21 or U-21. (The appearance of the name of the bacterial strain among local rumours is rather strange.) On 16 July, 1980, *The New York Times* published the same story, but named the strain as "I-21".

It was *Possev's* story that was reprinted as front page news by *Bild Zeitung* a few weeks later. The West German newspaper removed a few technical details, such as the names of the bacteria and how long the epidemic lasted. The same story appeared in *Nature* at the end of March, without indicating the source but containing all the details of *Possev's* version.



'Some details about the accident, although based on rumours, gave the impression that something really had happened in Sverdlovsk ...'

THE GREAT RUSSIAN GERM WAR DISASTER

The Russians have tried to hush-up an accident at a bacteriological research plant which killed hundreds of people and seriously injured thousands more. David Floyd reveals the horror which hit Novosibirsk

Hundreds of people are reported to have died, and thousands to have suffered serious injury, as a result of an accident which took place this summer in a factory involved in the production of bacteriological weapons in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk.

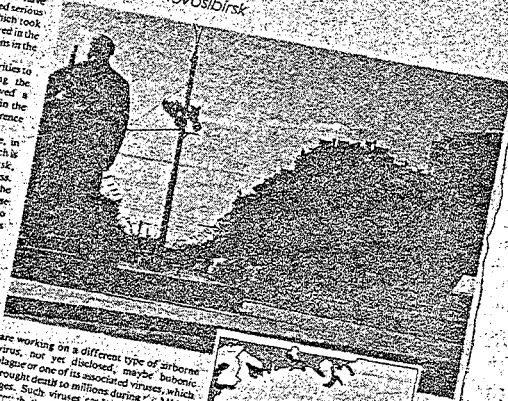
Despite efforts by the Soviet authorities to suppress all information concerning the report of it from a traveller who was in the city at the time there has been no reference to it in the Soviet press.

Shortly after the accident took place on the southern outskirts of Novosibirsk, within a short time all the hospitals in the city were crammed with patients, whose numbers ran into thousands, according to the report. The death rate among the victims was said to be very high.

Remains of those who died were not allowed to see the bodies, which were delivered to them in sealed coffins. A few who succeeded in examining the bodies said they were covered in brown patches.

Some time after the accident bodies were found in the area near the factory spreading streets and walls with disinfectant. The casualties included some people who were visiting Novosibirsk at the time. A man on travel to and from the city was involved for a time, and later people were brought back to talk about what had happened.

are working on a different type of airborne virus, not yet disclosed, maybe bubonic plague or one of its associated viruses, which brought death to millions during the Middle Ages. Such viruses can be spread by the air.



was under the supervision of Colonel General Efim Ivanovich Smirnov. However, this name is familiar—Efim Smirnov was named in the *Now!* story last year. According to *Now!*, Efim Smirnov was head of the Red Army's medical services during the Second World War and is now responsible for the development of bacteriological weapons for the Ministry of Defence. A person who had such a high position in the Soviet Army 40 years ago would be a very old person by now. Anybody who knows the Soviet system will realise that such a ranking and old official must live and work in Moscow. He would not be in charge of local facilities at Sverdlovsk.

The *Washington Post* also distorted the original reports about the duration of the epidemic. Describing the case, the *Washington Post* informed: "This information indicates that approximately 1000 people died within a matter of hours." All Russian sources, however (*Possev*, *Popovsky*, and recently *Russkaya Mysl*), described an epidemic which lasted about one month with about 30 to 40 fatalities per day. Using independent emigré sources in Israel, *The Sunday Times* reported a total death toll of 300. The prolonged character of the epidemic (beginning in April and ending in May) is also consistent with the publication in April 1979 of three articles about anthrax in a local newspaper *Vecherny Sverdlovsk*. It is rather strange that even the original author, N.N., did not mention these articles.

Some of the data mentioned in the reports of this anthrax epidemic, can be checked easily using standard Soviet medical reference books. Anthrax is apparently still a serious problem in eastern parts of the USSR. This means that research and the production of the vaccine is certainly going on in research centres which, of course, are well sealed off from outside attention. The anthrax vaccine is made from live, and still virulent encapsulated bacteria. Immunity after vaccination is short and revaccination is necessary after one year. The vaccine is active for not more than two years. This means that the production of the anthrax vaccine entails large-scale cultivation of anthrax bacteria and production of spores.

The medical authorities in the USSR are certainly responsible for the anthrax outbreak in Sverdlovsk. It was connected either with tainted meat or wool or a laboratory accident. But there are no facts yet to indicate that the production of a bacterial weapon was the cause of the Sverdlovsk epidemic. The bacteriological facilities of the military system could take part in this work, but there has been no single fact published about the Sverdlovsk case which has indicated a possible stockpile of an actual anthrax weapon. If an outbreak of pulmonary anthrax (which is suspected by the CIA) is the result of the accidental explosion of an actual weapon (with a cloud of spores), then the stories that the epidemic continued for a whole month (with 30 to 40 casualties per day) could not have been the case. Pulmonary anthrax develops a few hours after the infection has been inhaled and the disease continues for only two to three days. Death is almost inevitable, not within three to four hours as reported, but two to three days. Intestinal anthrax is also lethal; death is usually within one to six days after infection. If the epidemic really lasted for one month, then the pulmonary form could have been present during only the first few days, not later.

The Sverdlovsk epidemic, as is usual in the USSR because of secrecy about all epidemics, will hardly be described in detail in Soviet medical literature. However, it is not reasonable to use arguments about the tragedy in Sverdlovsk to revive germ warfare preparations or chemical warfare research and production elsewhere. The unproved and artificially sensationalised reports about the alleged Soviet "violation" of the Biological Warfare Convention do not justify the possible violation of this Convention by other nations. □

Mark Popovsky, who was interviewed by *Science* in April, did not add anything new to the *Possev* story, despite the fact that he insisted that he had got information from a friend in Sverdlovsk. Neither *Bild*, nor *Nature* nor *Science* has acknowledged the existence of *Possev's* story, but the links between them are clear, some statements being identical. *Nature* gave the name of the alleged bacterial strain (V-21) and the figure of dead in all cases was around 1000.

In April 1980, *Possev* acknowledged that its story was wrong and that what it had reported in 1979 as a "Novosibirsk case" was really a "Sverdlovsk case". In this new article the description of the origin of the epidemic was a clear mixture of its previous two stories. Uktus was now a suburb of Sverdlovsk and the germ plant was situated here, not in the "military settlement No. 19". Bodies of the dead were not burned, as in the earlier *Bild* and *Possev* versions, but buried in a disinfectant liquid.

The Soviet Union was officially asked by the US government for an explanation, and in a rather rare admission Tass acknowledged that there had been an anthrax epidemic in Sverdlovsk. According to Tass, this was caused by adverse weather conditions which had made sheep and cattle susceptible to contagious diseases, by lack of personal hygiene in tending livestock, and by the purchase of unbranded meat, wool and hides from unauthorised individuals. Tass also acknowledged that anthrax has never been completely eradicated from the Urals.

This explanation was initially accepted. Nobody in the West had really expected that there would be any official reaction from the USSR at all. It is true, of course, that anthrax still is quite a common problem among farm animals in the Urals, Siberia, Soviet Middle East and even Caucasus. However, human cases of anthrax were usually found in rural areas. A few days later the US government, on the basis of "new intelligence reports", made clear that it could "refute the Soviet version of the anthrax story". However, all the "new intelligence" apparently consisted of was a few details published earlier in *Possev*, but missing in *Bild*.

The Sverdlovsk anthrax outbreak again made headline news in early July when the report of the US Congressional Committee on Intelligence was released (*New Scientist*, 10 July, p 93). This report, however, did not contain any new details. It repeated the same information which had been published in the *Possev* articles. The only difference was that the mysterious V-21 or U-21 strains were correctly replaced by *Bacillus anthracis* spores. It was also revealed that the military settlement Number 19