New Evidence on the Korean War

Editor’s note: The documents featured in this section of the Bulletin present new evidence on the allegations that the United States used bacteriological weapons during the Korean War. In the accompanying commentaries, historian Kathryn Weathersby and scientist Milton Leitenberg (University of Maryland) provide analysis, context and interpretation of these documents. Unlike other documents published in the Bulletin, these documents, first obtained and published (in Japanese) by the Japanese newspaper Sankei Shimbun, have not been authenticated by access to the archival originals (or even photocopies thereof). The documents were copied by hand in the Russian Presidential Archive in Moscow, then typed. Though both commentators believe them to be genuine based on textual analysis, questions about the authenticity of the documents, as the commentators note, will remain until the original documents become available in the archives. Copies of the typed transcription (in Russian) have been deposited at the National Security Archive, a non-governmental research institute and repository of declassified documents based at George Washington University (Gelman Library, Suite 701; 2130 H St., NW; Washington, DC 20037; tel: 202/994-7000; fax: 202/994-7005) and are accessible to researchers. CWIHP welcomes the discussion of these new findings and encourages the release of the originals and additional materials on the issue from Russian, Chinese, Korean and U.S. archives.

Deceiving the Deceivers: Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang, and the Allegations of Bacteriological Weapons Use in Korea

By Kathryn Weathersby

In January 1998 the Japanese newspaper Sankei Shimbun published excerpts from a collection of documents purportedly obtained from the Russian Presidential Archive (known formally as the Archive of the President, Russian Federation, or APRF) by its Moscow-based reporter, Yasuo Naito. These remarkable documents provide the first Soviet evidence yet to emerge regarding the longstanding allegations that the United States employed bacteriological weapons during the Korean War. Sankei Shimbun subsequently agreed to make the documents available to scholars; a translation of the complete texts is presented below.

The circumstances under which these documents were obtained are unusual. Because the Presidential Archive does not allow researchers to make photocopies, the texts were copied by hand and subsequently re-typed. We therefore do not have such tell-tale signs of authenticity as seals, stamps or signatures that a photocopy can provide. Furthermore, since the documents have not been formally released, we do not have their archival citations. Nor do we know the selection criteria of the person who collected them.

In these regrettable circumstances, how do we evaluate the authenticity of the new evidence? Until the Presidential Archive begins granting access to its important holdings through regular channels rather than through the ad hoc arrangements it has used thus far, we must rely on textual analysis and our experience working in other Russian archives. Are the contents of the documents persuasive enough to overcome the skepticism raised by their irregular provenance? Their style and form do not raise suspicion. The specifics of persons, dates and events are consistent with evidence available from a wide array of other sources. As is apparent from the translations below, their contents are so complex and interwoven that it would have been extremely difficult to forge them. In short, the sources are credible.

They are, however, fragmentary. The contents address—and appear to answer—the key question of the veracity of the allegations, but far more documentation, particularly from China, is needed to give a full account of this massive propaganda campaign. In an accompanying article, Milton Leitenberg discusses the history of the allegations and analyzes the disclosures made in these new sources. This commentary examines the context in which these documents originated, discussing not only what they reveal about the Soviet/Chinese/North Korean campaign falsely to accuse the U.S. of using bacteriological weapons in Korea, but also about the power struggle within the Soviet leadership after Stalin’s death, the determination of the new leadership to distance itself from Stalin’s foreign policy, and the impact of these developments on Moscow’s relations with China and North Korea.

Except for the first brief excerpt from a Mao to Stalin telegram of 21 February 1952 [Document No. 1], the context of these documents is the byzantine power struggle within the Soviet leadership after Stalin’s death, the determination of the new leadership to distance itself from Stalin’s foreign policy, and the impact of these developments on Moscow’s relations with China and North Korea.
personal interests. An important part of this succession struggle and policy realignment was the successful effort by Lavrentii P. Beria, the former NKVD head and a possible successor to Stalin, to remove Semen D. Ignatiev, a Khrushchev protegé, from his post as Minister of State Security. Ignatiev was a rival for control of the security services and had also overseen the “Doctor’s Plot,” the deadly new purge Stalin had begun in the weeks before he died. With the entire leadership determined to end the purge so as not to become its victims, Beria was able to arrest M.D. Riumin, the subordinate of Ignatiev who was directly responsible for carrying out the “Doctor’s Plot.”

The security chief himself, however, was only removed from his post and then expelled from the party. He was not arrested, presumably because his patron provided sufficient protection. Prosvda explained on 6 April 1953 that Ignatiev had been removed because of “blindness and gullibility,” relatively mild charges in that environment. After Khrushchev succeeded in arresting Beria in June of that year, he reinstated Ignatiev in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s Central Committee (CPSU CC).

The documents below show that Beria prepared two formal charges against Ignatiev. The second charge has long been assumed—his participation in the Doctor’s Plot. This is the meaning of the Party Control Commission’s claim [Document No. 12] that he was guilty of “gross violations of Soviet legality and the falsification of investigative materials” according to which “Soviet citizens were subjected to groundless arrests and charged with false accusations of committing serious state crimes.” The first charge, however, has not been known. The Commission declared that during his tenure as minister of state security of the USSR he “received a document of special political importance in April 1952” but did not report it to the government, with the result that “the prestige of the Soviet Union, [and of] the camp of peace and democracy suffered real political damage.”

The documents below indicate that the information Ignatiev allegedly concealed from the government was the falsity of the Chinese allegations that the Americans were using bacteriological weapons in the Korean War, claims which formed the basis of a massive international political campaign the Soviet Union had conducted over the previous year. To support his case against Ignatiev, Beria obtained testimony from three Soviet officials who had dealt with this matter while they served in North Korea—two former advisers and the current Soviet ambassador to the DPRK. The statements of these three describe in detail [Documents Nos. 2, 3, 4] remarkable measures taken by the North Koreans and Chinese, with the assistance of Soviet advisers, to create false evidence to corroborate their charges against the United States.

Since it had long been standard operating procedure in the Soviet Union for security services officials to obtain false confessions from an accused person or false incriminating testimony from the associates of the accused, it is possible that these blandly stated accounts of outrageous activities have as little relation to reality as the countless coerced “confessions” collected during Stalin’s reign. In this case, however, the censure of Ignatiev for allegedly hiding knowledge of the baselessness of the Chinese claims against the U.S. was accompanied by a decision of the entire leadership to cease the campaign on this issue, apparently because of the risk of embarrassment to the Soviet Union should the claims be revealed as fabrications. The Central Committee Presidium ordered the Soviet delegation in the United Nations not “to show interest in discussing this question or even more in fanning the flames of this question” [Document No. 6]. It also commissioned Molotov to present within a week a proposal on the position the Soviet government would take on the issue in the future [Document No. 7]. Even more significantly, the Presidium of the USSR Council of Ministers dispatched an emissary to Beijing and Pyongyang with the harsh message that the Soviet government was now aware that it had been misled regarding the claims that the U.S. was using bacteriological weapons and that it “recommended” that the Chinese and North Korean governments cease their accusations [Documents Nos. 8, 9, 11]. Beijing and Pyongyang followed the Moscow’s instructions; all three states ceased their campaign regarding these allegations in April 1953. The post-Stalin leadership therefore took significant action on the basis that the allegations of American use of bacteriological weapons were false and consequently potentially damaging to the Soviet Union.

While the testimony contained in these documents regarding the fabrication of evidence of bacteriological weapons use are credible, the claim that Ignatiev and V.N. Razuvaev, the Soviet ambassador to Pyongyang, removed from his post for the same alleged offense, kept this information from the Soviet leadership seems disingenuous. Documents from the Russian Foreign Ministry Archive (available through normal research procedures) indicate that Soviet officials at many levels, from embassy advisers to Stalin himself, were involved in managing the North Korean propaganda campaign about American use of bacteriological weapons so as to prevent the falsity of the claims from being revealed. For example, in March 1952, the month after the Chinese and North Koreans first made their allegation, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko ordered Korea specialist G.I. Tunkin2 and two other officers then serving with him in the Foreign Ministry’s First Far Eastern Department, to inform him immediately about the provisions of the Geneva Conventions of 1929 [sic] and 1949 regarding investigations of claims alleging violations of rules of warfare. Gromyko’s order was prompted by alarm over U.S. Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson’s request to the chairman of the International Committee of the Red Cross that the ICRC investigate the charge that bacteriological weapons were being used in Korea. Gromyko anticipated that the ICRC might soon ask permission from the DPRK to conduct such an
investigation and he therefore needed to prepare a strategy to fend off such a request. Tunkin and his associates informed him that since the Geneva Convention specified that the parties participating in the armed conflict would themselves investigate the facts of any alleged violation of the convention, the DPRK could refuse a proposal from the ICRC to conduct an investigation. It is worth noting that Gromyko’s order was issued before Moscow received a request from Pyongyang for assistance in formulating a reply to the ICRC. And it is all but certain that the initiative on such a matter involving the United States came from Vyshinsky or Stalin, not from the deputy foreign minister. The Soviet leadership was concerned enough about the potential ramifications of Acheson’s proposal that it began preparing a response even before receiving a request for advice from Pyongyang or Beijing. Tunkin recommended that the Foreign Ministry ask its ambassadors in the PRC and DPRK “what they know regarding the position of the Chinese and Korean friends in connection with Acheson’s appeal.”

A month later the highest levels of the Soviet government approved advice to Pyongyang regarding how to avoid a visit by an international team of medical professionals who would be able to report accurately on evidence of the use of bacteriological weapons in Korea. Vyshinsky requested Stalin’s approval of an answer drafted by Ambassador Razuvaev for the DPRK to make to U.N. Secretary General Trygve Lie’s proposal that the World Health Organization provide assistance in combating the spread of epidemics in North Korea. Razuvaev explained that Lie had sent telegrams with this proposal to Pyongyang on March 20 and March 29, but “the Korean friends considered it inadvisable to answer these telegrams.” However, after the DPRK received a third telegram from Lie on April 6, the North Korean government appealed to Razuvaev for advice regarding whether it should continue to ignore these communications. Razuvaev recommended that the DPRK answer Lie, to which the Soviet Foreign Ministry agreed, but with changes to his proposed text. The draft answer sent for Stalin’s approval—with copies to Molotov, Malenkov, Beria, Mikoyan, Kaganovich, Bulganin and Khrushchev—stated that the proposal could not be accepted because the World Health Organization did not have proper international authority. Furthermore, apparently as an additional pretext to fend off such a visit, the DPRK should state that “the USA continues to refuse to discuss the use of bacteriological weapons, which are forbidden by the Geneva Protocol of 1925.”

Later that month Vyshinsky was again asked to approve advice to the DPRK regarding statements it should make in relation to the use of bacteriological weapons. Ambassador Razuvaev suggested that the Soviet government recommend to “the Korean friends” that they make a statement about their adherence to the Geneva Protocol of 1925 forbidding the use of bacteriological weapons, since the World Peace Council, a Soviet front organization, had called on all governments to sign, ratify and observe the Geneva Convention. The Foreign Ministry’s First Far Eastern Department reported to Vyshinsky that they considered Razuvaev’s proposal unacceptable for two reasons. First, for the DPRK to issue such a statement now, after war had been going on in Korea for two years and the DPRK had protested against the use of bacteriological weapons by the Americans, would “give a strange impression and elicit bewilderment.” Second, since “social opinion accuses the USA, not the DPRK, of violation of the Protocol” the North Korean position on the question “will remain strong regardless of whether it makes a statement of adherence to the Protocol.”

Numerous other records from the Russian archives, including documents published in Issue 6/7 of the Cold War International History Project Bulletin, make it clear that the Soviet Union exercised extremely close supervision over the actions of the North Korean government, and that decision-making within the Soviet foreign policy apparatus was very highly centralized. Even minor questions, such as whether the DPRK could temporarily use a Soviet steam shovel located in a Manchurian port, were decided at the level of foreign minister or deputy foreign minister. It is therefore not credible that Soviet advisers in Korea could have engaged in the falsification of evidence on this important matter without the knowledge and approval of the highest levels of the Soviet government.

Why then did Stalin conduct this risky propaganda campaign? It appears that the initiative for the allegations came from the Chinese. As Milton Leitenberg notes, Japan had used bacteriological weapons in China, the U.S. had shielded the Japanese officers responsible for their development, and epidemic diseases were widespread in Manchuria. Memoir and documentary sources from China cited by Shu Guang Zhang indicate that, as Mao claimed in Document No. 9, the allegations were first made by Chinese commanders in the field. Not wishing to be guilty of a lack of vigilance, particularly after Soviet advisers had warned the Chinese officers that the Americans might use bacteriological, chemical or nuclear weapons in Korea, the field commanders nervously concluded that the American planes that dominated the skies over North Korea and occasionally overflew Chinese territory were responsible for the outbreak of cholera, plague and other infectious diseases in early 1952. After receiving the reports,
Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai ordered a laboratory investigation of the evidence and dispatched epidemic prevention teams to Korea. However, they also denounced the United States for engaging in bacteriological warfare, apparently before the laboratory tests were completed. The evidence presented below suggests that once Mao learned that his commanders’ reports were inaccurate, he decided to continue the propaganda campaign anyway. Since one of his main reasons for fighting the Americans in Korea was to maintain revolutionary momentum within China, as Chen Jian has persuasively argued, he was apparently unwilling to forfeit the domestic benefits of charging the United States with using heinous weapons against Chinese soldiers, not to mention the propaganda value internationally. The North Koreans were similarly disposed both to believe the allegations and to find it worthwhile to fabricate evidence, a contradiction that the passions generated by this war could well have sustained.

Stalin’s allies thus presented him with an opportunity for a dramatic version of what the Bolsheviks called “agitation and propaganda.” The ferocity of the American bombing of North Korea, which elicited considerable international criticism, enhanced this opportunity. As I have discussed elsewhere, from the fall of 1951 until his death, Stalin encouraged the Chinese and North Koreans to take a hard line in the armistice negotiations in Korea because he concluded that prolonging the war benefited the Soviet Union. From his point of view, so long as it safely remained a stalemate, the war drained U.S. resources, exacerbated tensions among the Western allies and provided the Soviet Union with an excellent opportunity to gather intelligence on American military technology and organization. To this list should now be added the propaganda value of charging the United States with war crimes.

In this instance, as in so many others, Stalin’s reasoning was decidedly shortsighted. Having little understanding of “capitalist” economies, he could not see that the drain on American resources caused by the war was more than offset by the increased military spending it prompted. Similarly, blind to the actual bonds between the Western allies, he exaggerated the tensions the war caused and underestimated the extent to which Soviet actions in Korea solidified the Western alliance, particularly with regard to the controversial issue of rearming (West) Germany. Unaccountable to anyone within his own country, he was unable to perceive that false charges of war crimes could work to the detriment of the accuser.

It is therefore all the more striking that the new leaders in Moscow moved so decisively to distance themselves from Stalin’s foreign policy. Not only did they immediately resolve to end the war in Korea, but they also stopped the propaganda campaign of false allegations against the Americans, on the grounds that it damaged Soviet prestige. For the same reason, they renounced the territorial claims Stalin had made against Turkey in 1945 and restored diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia, Greece, and Israel. At the same time, however, they implemented the decision to end the bacteriological warfare allegations in a way that was highly insulting to their Chinese allies. Moscow instructed the Soviet ambassador to Beijing, V.V. Kuznetsov, to inform Mao Zedong in blunt language that the Soviet government and the CPSU CC had been misled: The information the Chinese had supplied about the Americans’ use of bacteriological weapons in Korea was false [Document No. 8]. According to Kuznetsov’s account of his ensuing conversation with Mao, the Chinese leader understandably refused to take responsibility for the false reports, the falsity of which had been well-known to the Soviet government. Instead, he simply said that the claims had been based on reports from Chinese military officers in the field and that the reliability of those reports would again be investigated. During the conversation, Kuznetsov reported, Mao displayed “some nervousness”—“he smoked a lot, crushed cigarettes and drank a lot of tea,” though he calmed down by the end of the conversation. Zhou Enlai, moreover, “behaved with intent seriousness and some uneasiness” [Document No. 9].

One can only speculate about why the Soviet leadership treated its important Chinese ally in a manner virtually guaranteed to worsen relations between Moscow and Beijing. Perhaps it was just a manifestation of the durability of Stalinist practices, despite the new leadership’s desire to improve on their predecessor’s record. It may also, however, have been Beria’s initiative, as reckless as his reported proposal to abandon “building socialism” in the GDR for the present or his attempt to persuade the Yugoslavs to cooperate in security services.11 If Beria initiated the directive to Kuznetsov (and managed to push it through the Council of Ministers), this could explain why the Chinese did not, so far as we know, include this episode in their later complaints of ill-treatment by Moscow. Since Beria was arrested a little over a month after this conversation, the remaining leadership could claim that while this action was indeed improper, they had taken care of the problem. But why would Beria have wanted to insult Mao? Perhaps, considering himself Stalin’s successor, he was attempting to demonstrate to the most powerful of the foreign Communist leaders just who was in charge. In 1938, after Beria was named head of the NKVD, Stalin called him in to his office and brought up the old charge that he had spied against the Bolsheviks in 1919.12 The Soviet godfather did not intend to remove Beria; he just wanted to make sure the new security chief, always a potentially dangerous person, understood who was in charge. It would have been natural for Stalin’s protégé to use comparable methods against Mao. If so, Khrushchev’s accusations of dangerous adventurism on Beria’s part were even more well-founded than previously known.

How did the DPRK leadership view Moscow’s
sudden disavowal of the bacteriological warfare allegations? The message was delivered to Pak Chang-ok, the secretary of the Central Committee of the North Korean Communist Party, because Kim Il Sung was allegedly ill [Document No. 11]. We thus do not have a record of Kim Il Sung’s response and no other mention of the affair has come to light. We do know, however, that after Stalin’s death Kim Il Sung took remarkably insubordinate actions. Beginning in 1956 he purged his government of the “Soviet-Koreans”—Soviet citizens of Korean nationality placed in high positions in North Korea in 1945-46 in order to serve as liaisons between Pyongyang and Moscow. He also developed his own version of Marxist ideology (“juche”) emphasizing the importance of national “self-reliance.” Kim’s assertiveness was particularly striking given his complete subordination to the Soviet Union during Stalin’s time. From 1945-53 the Soviet Union created, supported, and closely supervised its client state in Korea. Throughout this process, the role of the Soviet ambassador in Pyongyang was key. First Shtykov and then Razuevaev had virtually daily contact with the top Korean leader; it was through the ambassador that Kim dispatched his countless requests and received Moscow’s constant “recommendations.” What effect must it therefore have had on Kim for Stalin’s successors, only weeks after the supreme leader’s death, suddenly to remove their ambassador and chief military adviser to North Korea, abruptly stop the enormous and important campaign charging the United States with using bacteriological weapons, blame the Chinese ally for the falsity of the accusations, and claim that the ambassador withheld from the Soviet government information he clearly had long discussed with his superiors in Moscow? Such actions must have signaled to Kim that he would both be capable of and justified in redefining his relations with Moscow.

In conclusion, this new evidence is important not only for finally laying to rest the longstanding allegations—never withdrawn by the Soviet, Chinese or North Korean governments—that the United States used bacteriological weapons in Korea, but also for the light it sheds on the ways in which the distinctive nature of the Soviet regime shaped its foreign policy. The routine, pervasive mendacity that distinguished Soviet deceptiveness from the more episodic variation practiced by other governments, clearly corroded the regime’s domestic legitimacy. This evidence suggests that the impact on foreign relations was similar but perhaps more immediate. Renouncing as “bourgeois morality” any standards other than expediency made it difficult for Moscow to offer its allies the predictability and reciprocity they required, despite their shared ideology. With adversaries and neutral nations, the perception that the Soviet regime was not playing by the same rules as other states was an insurmountable barrier to normal relations. Indeed, the Soviet Union’s difficulty in maintaining mutually satisfactory relations with any state, with the possible exception of India, is one of the more striking aspects of the Cold War. These remarkable documents make it clearer why this was the case.

Documents

Translation by Kathryn Weathersby

1. Telegram from Mao Zedong to I.V. Stalin (Filippov) about the use by the Americans of bacteriological weapons in North Korea, 21 February 1952 (Excerpt)

—In the period from 28 January to 17 February 1952 the Americans used bacteriological weapons 8 times, [dropped] from planes and through artillery shells.


2. Explanatory Note from Glukhov, Deputy Chief of the Department of Counterespionage of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Urals Military District and former adviser to the Ministry of Public Security of the DPRK [Democratic People’s Republic of Korea], to L.P. Beria, Deputy Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers 13 April 1953

In February 1952 the government of the DPRK received information from Beijing that the Americans were using bacteriological weapons in Korea and China and that they [the Chinese] intended to publish their statement about this. At the insistence of the North Korean government, [the] MID [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the] DPRK decided to publish its own statement first. The Russian text of this statement of the Foreign Ministry of the DPRK, which corresponds to the one which the Chinese government put forward, was made by Petukhov, adviser at the Soviet embassy in North Korea.

The Koreans stated that the Americans had supposedly repeatedly exposed several areas of their country to plague and cholera. To prove these facts, the North Koreans, with the assistance of our advisers, created false areas of exposure. In June-July 1952 a delegation of specialists in bacteriology from the World Peace Council arrived in North Korea. Two false areas of exposure were prepared. In connection with this, the Koreans insisted on obtaining cholera bacteria from corpses which they would get from China. During the period of the work of the delegation, which included academicians A. Zaukov, who was an agent of the MGB [Ministry of State Security], an unworkable situation was created for them, with the help of our advisers, in order to frighten them and force them to leave. In this connection, under the leadership of Lt. Petrov,
adviser to the Engineering Department of the KPA [Korean People’s Army], explosions were set off near the place where the delegation was staying, and while they were in Pyongyang false air raid alarms were sounded.

Glukhov

3. Explanatory Note from Lieutenant of the Medical Service Selivanov, student at the S.M. Kirov Military-Medical Academy and former adviser to the Military-Medical Department of the KPA, to L.P. Beria 14 April 1953

In February 1952 the press published a statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK regarding the alleged use by the Americans of bacteriological weapons in Korea and China. In the opinion of the North Korean government, this was necessary in order to compromise the Americans in this war. However, to all outward appearances, they seriously believed the information about this that they received from the Chinese. Kim Il Sung even feared that bacteriological weapons would be used regularly.

In March 1952 I gave the reply from Shtemenko [Chief of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces] to the inquiry from the General Staff of the SA [Soviet Army], that there are not and have not been instances of plague or cholera in the PRC, there are no examples of bacteriological weapons, [and] if any are discovered they will be immediately sent to Moscow.

Earlier, already in 1951, I helped Korean doctors compose a statement about the spread by the Americans of smallpox among the population of North Korea.

Before the arrival in Korea of the delegation of jurists, the North Korean representatives were seriously worried that they had not succeeded in creating sites of infection and constantly asked the advisers at MID [Ministry of Foreign Affairs], the Ministry of Health and the Military-Medical Administration of the KPA—advisers Smirnov, Malov and myself—what to do in such a situation.

At the end of April 1952, I left the DPRK.

Selivanov

4. Explanatory Note from Lt. Gen. V.N. Razuvaev, Ambassador of the USSR to the DPRK and Chief Military Adviser to the KPA, to L.P. Beria 18 April 1953

In the spring of 1952 the government of China gave the government of the DPRK the text of a statement about the use of bacteriological means of warfare by the Americans. Kim Il Sung and the minister of foreign affairs of the DPRK requested consultation with me, [making the appeal] through Petukhov, the secretary of our embassy.

Publications about this had already appeared in the press, but our advisers and the organs of power of the DPRK, upon checking, had not confirmed these facts. The publications occasionally contained crude reports. For example, they indicated that the Americans were spreading infected ants, [but ants] cannot be carriers of disease since they contain “spirit” [a venom which counteracts disease-causing agents]. I gave Kim Il Sung our conclusions, with statistical proof, and advised him to ask Beijing for explanation. But several days later the North Koreans published a statement. They did this quickly, since the Chinese wanted to publish their own statement. And exactly two days later the statement of Zhou Enlai followed. I was presented with the North Korean statement beforehand. Shtemenko also did not elucidate this matter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since he feared revealing reports by technical personnel. Photos were received from the Chinese of anti-epidemiological detachments and of insects they found which the Americans were allegedly spreading in Manchuria. However, such insects exist in Korea but not in China.

One commander of the epidemiological detachment of Chinese volunteers showed on a map the zone of infection. This was all of North Korea and Manchuria. At the end of February 1952, Kim Il Sung and his secretary Mun Il declared at the KG KPA that a massive American bombing with bacteriological bombs had been recorded—what is to be done? On 27 February 1952 a meeting was held of the Military Cabinet of the DPRK and a decision was adopted to draft a Military Cabinet resolution about measures for fighting against epidemiological disease on the territory of the DPRK. Later Kim Il Sung and the minister of foreign affairs communicated to me that an international delegation was coming—what is to be done? With the cooperation of Soviet advisers a plan was worked out for action by the Ministry of Health. False plague regions were created, burials of bodies of those who died and their disclosure were organized, measures were taken to receive the plague and cholera bacillus. The adviser of MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs] DPRK proposed to infect with the cholera and plague bacilli persons sentenced to execution, in order to prepare the corresponding [pharmaceutical] preparations after their death. Before the arrival of the delegation of jurists, materials were sent to Beijing for exhibit. Before the arrival of the second delegation, the minister of health was sent to Beijing for the bacillus. However, they didn’t give him anything there, but they gave [it to him] later in Mukden. Moreover, a pure culture of cholera bacillus was received in Pyongyang from bodies of families who died from using poor quality meat.

The second international delegation was in China, it didn’t come to the areas of North Korea since the North Korean exhibition was set up in Beijing. In the region the delegation visited landmines [fougasse] had not exploded. By the end of the year propaganda in the press about the American use of bacteriological weapons in Korea and
China increased, since the Chinese received information from American prisoners of war about their participation in spreading bacteriological means of warfare. From 8 to 14 December 1952, a quarantine was established at the Soviet-Chinese and Soviet-Korean borders. From January 1953 on, the publication of materials about the Americans’ use of bacteriological weapons ceased in the DPRK. In February 1953 the Chinese again appealed to the Koreans regarding the question of unmasking the Americans in bacteriological war. The Koreans did not accept this proposal.

Moreover, the Chinese also wrote that the Americans were using poison gas in the course of the war. However, my examinations into this question did not give positive results. For example, on 10 April 1953 the general commanding the Eastern Front reported to Kim Il Sung that 10-12 persons were poisoned in a tunnel by an American chemical missile. Our investigation established that these deaths were caused by poisoning from carbonic acid gas [released into] the tunnel, which had no ventilation, after the explosion of an ordinary large caliber shell.

Razuvaev

5. Memorandum from L.P. Beria to G.M. Malenkov and to the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union], 21 April 1953

In March 1952 before the arrival in Korea of a delegation of the International Association of Democratic Jurists, the Minister of State Security of the USSR, Ignatiev S.D., received a memorandum (to “Denisov”) from Glukhov—former adviser of the Ministry of State Security of the DPRK and Smirnov—former adviser of MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs] DPRK about the fact that with the help of the ambassador of the USSR in the DPRK, Chief Military Adviser to the KPA Razuvaev V.N., two false regions of infection were simulated for the purpose of accusing the Americans of using bacteriological weapons in Korea and China. Two Koreans who had been sentenced to death and were being held in a hut were infected. One of them was later poisoned.

Ignatiev did not report this memorandum, which had special political importance, to anyone. As a result, the Soviet Union suffered real political damage in the international arena. I discovered this document in the archive of the MGB USSR upon receiving the matter at the beginning of April 1953.

I ask your decision regarding [the question of] investigating the circumstances of this question and naming the guilty parties.

Beria

6. Memorandum from V.M. Molotov to Members of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU (Malenkov, Beria, Khrushchev), 21 April 1953, with Attached Note from V.N. Razuvaev of 21 April 1953

—On 22 February 1952 the DPRK received an intentionally false statement from the Chinese about the use of bacteriological weapons by the Americans.

—The Koreans were thus presented with a fait accompli and almost simultaneously published in the press their own statement on this question.

—On 22 August 1952 the embassy of the USSR in the DPRK reported to [USSR Foreign Minister Andrei] Vyshinsky that the Chinese presented the Koreans with a fait accompli regarding “the alleged use by the Americans of bacteriological weapons in Korea and China” (report “Political and Economic Relations between the Korean People’s Democratic Republic and China as of August 1952.”)

—Beginning on 27 March 1952 the USA raised the question in the Political Committee and then placed on the agenda of the UN General Assembly [the question] “On the dispassionate investigation of accusations of the use of bacteriological weapons by the armed forces of the UN.”

—in June 1952 the USA also raised the question of investigating the accusation regarding this in the UN Security Council, and in connection with this refused to ratify the Geneva Protocol of 1925 which forbids the use of bacteriological weapons.

—It is proposed (to Malenkov, Beria, Khrushchev, Bulganin, Kaganovich, Mikoyan) to confirm an order to Vyshinsky, sent to the session of the General Assembly of the UN, regarding the question of bacteriological war in Korea, which will recommend that “it is inadvisable to show interest in discussing this question or even more in ‘fanning the flames’ of this question.”

7. Protocol No. 6 of the Meeting of the Presidium of the CC CPSU about the MVD Note on the Results of the Investigations into the Reports of Former Advisers to the Ministry of State Security and DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, comrades Glukhov and Smirnov, 24 April 1953 (Excerpt)

1. For unauthorized actions of a provocative character which caused significant damage to the interests of the state, to remove V.N. Razuvaev from the post of Ambassador of the USSR to the Korean People’s Democratic Republic and the post of Main Military Adviser, to deprive him of the rank of general and to prosecute him.

2. To commission Comrades Molotov and Bulganin to prepare a proposal about candidates for the post of Ambassador of the USSR to the DPRK and for the post of military attache.

3. To commission Comrade Molotov:
   a) within a week to present a proposal regarding the
future position of the Government of the Soviet Union on the question “On the use of bacteriological weapons by the American troops in Korea;”

b) to prepare the text of a report which will be handed, by workers of the USSR MID [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] who will be sent to Beijing and Pyongyang, to Comrades Kuznetsov and Suzdalev so that they can inform Comrades Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung about this matter.

4. To introduce for confirmation by the Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee the following proposal of the Presidium of the CPSU Central Committee:

“In connection with the incorrect and dishonest conduct, revealed by the new circumstances, of the former minister of State Security of the USSR Comrade Ignatiev, of concealing from the government a number of important state documents, to remove S.D. Ignatiev from the membership of the CPSU Central Committee.”

5. To commission the Party Control Commission of the CPSU Central Committee to review the question of the party responsibility of S.D. Ignatiev.

8. Resolution of the Presidium of the USSR Council of Ministers about letters to the Ambassador of the USSR in the PRC, V.V. Kuznetsov, and to the Charge d’Affaires of the USSR in the DPRK, S.P. Suzdalev, 2 May 1953

For Mao Zedong

“The Soviet Government and the Central Committee of the CPSU were misled. The spread in the press of information about the use by the Americans of bacteriological weapons in Korea was based on false information. The accusations against the Americans were fictitious.”

To give recommendations:

To cease publication in the press of materials accusing the Americans of using bacteriological weapons in Korea and China.

To consider it desirable that the Government of the PRC (DPRK) declare in the UN that the resolution of the General Assembly of 23 April about investigating the facts of the use by the Americans of bacteriological weapons on the territory of China (Korea) cannot be legal, since it was made without the participation of representatives of the PRC (DPRK). Since there is no use of bacteriological weapons, there is no reason to conduct an investigation.

In a tactical way to recommend that the question of bacteriological warfare in China (Korea) be removed from discussion in international organizations and organs of the UN.

Soviet workers responsible for participation in the fabrication of the so-called “proof” of the use of bacteriological weapons will receive severe punishment.

9. Telegram to V.M. Molotov from Beijing from the Ambassador of the USSR to the PRC, V.V. Kuznetsov, about the Results of a Conversation with Mao Zedong on 12 May 1953 [not dated]

In accordance with the resolution confirmed by the USSR Council of Ministers No. 1212 487 of 7 May 1953, the adviser of the embassy of the USSR to the PRC Vas’kov was sent to Beijing and Pyongyang with instructions from the Soviet government.

On 11 May 1953 at 24:00 Kuznetsov and Likhachev were received by Mao Zedong. Zhou Enlai was also present.

After listening to the recommendation of the Soviet government and the CPSU Central Committee about the desirability of curtailing the campaign for unmasking the Americans’ use of bacteriological weapons in Korea and China, Mao Zedong said that the campaign was begun on the basis of reports from the command of Chinese volunteers in Korea and in Manchuria. It is difficult to establish now the authenticity of these reports. However, we have studied this question and will return to it once more. If falsification is discovered, then these reports from below should not be believed. In his turn, Mao said that in the struggle against counterrevolution, 650,000 persons were executed in the country, [and] it is true that one should not think that all those killed were guilty. Some number of innocent people apparently suffered.

In the course of the conversation some nervousness was noticed on the part of Mao Zedong, he smoked a lot, crushed cigarettes and drank a lot of tea. Towards the end of the conversation he laughed and joked, and calmed down. Zhou Enlai behaved with intent seriousness and some uneasiness.

Kuznetsov

10. Memorandum from the Chairman of the Party Control Commission of the CPSU CC Shkiriatov to G.M. Malenkov about the Results of the Party Investigation of the Actions of the Former Minister of State Security of the USSR S.D. Ignatiev, in Connection with the Report of Former Advisers to MOB and MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs of the] DPRK Comrades Glukhov and Smirnov, 17 May 1953

The note from Glukhov and Smirnov stayed with Ignatiev S.D. from 2 April until 3 November 1952. After
this time he passed it to Goglidze and told him that when the declarants [Glukhov and Smirnov] return from Korea he should tell them that they had not written notes on this question. Even after handing over the affair he did not say anything to anyone about it, and the note was discovered by L.P. Beria in the archival materials of the Ministry of State Security. A verification was conducted. In regard to this Ignatiev explained that he was under the impression of the published materials and did not attach any significance to the note. He did not believe in the authenticity of the information contained in it. He said that in July or in August 1952 he was called to Stalin on an official question and showed him this note. It is not possible to verify this. He must suffer political punishment.

Decision of the CPC of CC CPSU [Party Control Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union]:

For violation of state discipline and dishonest conduct to exclude Ignatiev S.D. from membership in the CPSU.

(Stricken)

11. Telegram from the USSR Charge d’Affaires in the DPRK, S.P. Suzdalev, to V.M. Molotov 1 June 1953

Copies to:
Molotov
Khrushchev
Beria

In connection with the illness of Kim II Sung, I was received by the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Labor Party of Korea, Pak Chang-ok. After listening to the recommendation of the Soviet government and the Central Committee of the CPSU for Kim II Sung about the desirability of curtailing the campaign for unmasking the Americans’ use of bacteriological weapons in Korea and China, Pak Chang-ok expressed great surprise at the actions and positions of [Soviet ambassador] V.N. Razuvaev. Pak Chang-ok stated the following: “We were convinced that everything was known in Moscow. We thought that setting off this campaign would give great assistance to the cause of the struggle against American imperialism.” In his turn, Pak Chang-ok did not exclude the possibility that the bombs and containers were thrown from Chinese planes, and [that] there were no infections.

At the end of the conversation, Pak Chang-ok expressed gratitude for the information presented and assured [me] that as soon as Kim II Sung’s health situation improves, he will inform him of the recommendation of the Soviet government and the Central Committee of the CPSU.

Suzdalev

12. Decision of the Party Control Commission of the CPSU CC regarding Comrade S.D. Ignatiev, 2 June 1953

Copies to:
Molotov
Khrushchev
Beria

Ignatiev S.D., during his tenure as minister of State Security of the USSR, having received in April 1952 a document of special political importance, did not report it to the government, as a result of which the prestige of the Soviet Union, [and of] the camp of peace and democracy, suffered real political damage.

In elucidating this question, Ignatiev gave false explanations. Moreover, verification of investigative work in the former Ministry of State Security of the USSR established that Ignatiev, being under the thumb of the adventurer and secret enemy of the Soviet people, the former chief of the Investigative Section for specially important matters of the USSR MGB, Riumin, allowed gross violations of Soviet legality and the falsification of investigative materials. According to these materials Soviet citizens were subjected to groundless arrests and charged with false accusations of committing serious state crimes.

Perverted methods of investigation and measures of physical coercion were used against those arrested according to the materials fabricated in this way. Through the files fabricated in the former Ministry of State Security, Ignatiev presented to governing organs knowingly false information.

For deception of the party and government, gross violations of Soviet legality, state discipline and dishonest conduct to exclude S.D. Ignatiev from membership in the CPSU.

Molotov—for
Khrushchev—for
Beria—for

Dr. Kathryn Weathersby, an independent scholar based in Washington, D.C., has published widely on the history of the Korean War. She has edited and translated numerous Russian documents for past issues of the Bulletin. Her publications include a forthcoming article “Stalin, Mao and the End of the War in Korea,” in Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963, ed. Odd Arne Westad (Cold War International History Project Book Series No. 1; Stanford UP/Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998).

1 E.g. Amy Knight, Beria, Stalin’s First Lieutenant (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1993); William Stueck The Korean
New Russian Evidence on the Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations: Background and Analysis

“For Mao Zedong
The Soviet Government and the Central Committee of the CPSU were misled. The spread in the press of information about the use by the Americans of bacteriological weapons in Korea was based on false information. The accusations against the Americans were fictitious.”

-Resolution of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers of the USSR about letters to the Ambassador of the USSR in the PRC, V.V. Kaznetsov, and to the Chargé d’Affaires of the USSR in the DPRK, S.P. Suzdalev, 2 May 1953.

By Milton Leitenberg

The major allegation of the use of biological weapons—one of the three categories of weapons of mass destruction, along with nuclear and chemical weapons—in the Cold War was made during the Korean War against the United States. In 1951 and again in 1952, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), North Korea, and the Soviet Union charged that the United States had used a wide range of biological warfare (BW) agents, bacterial and viral pathogens and insect vectors of disease, against China and North Korea. They alleged the use of BW agents against humans, plants, and animals. The charges were organized into a worldwide campaign and pressed at the United Nations; it was scarcely a matter simply of “the spread of press information...” US government officials denied the charges, but it has never before been possible to establish definitively whether the charges were true or false.

In January 1998, however, a reporter for the Japanese newspaper Sankei Shimbun published findings from twelve documents from former Soviet archives that provide explicit and detailed evidence that the charges were contrived and fraudulent. One document (a fragment of it) is dated 21 February 1952, while the remaining eleven date from 13 April to 2 June 1953, in the four months following Stalin’s death on 5 March 1953. While it is clear that the twelve documents are far from a complete history of the events, they nevertheless describe, at least in part, how the allegations were contrived by Chinese officials and Soviet advisors, and identify several of the individuals involved in the process. This paper provides a brief history of the allegations and a summary of the documents’ major disclosures.

The Charges

On 25 June 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea. Chinese military forces—the “Chinese People’s Volunteers” (CPV)—crossed the Yalu River and entered combat beginning in October 1950. In the spring of 1951, Chinese media repeatedly stated that the United States was using chemical weapons (“poison gas”) against Chinese