

Biological Warfare Allegations During the Korean War

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The Korean War is commonly referred to as the “forgotten war” and although it is characterized as such, this war, from 1950 to 1953, heavily influenced the progression of the Cold War and continues to influence Soviet-, Sino-, and Korean- American relations today. Following the Second World War, the Korean peninsula was divided into two states, North and South. Almost immediately following World War II, these states were heavily influenced by the capitalist and communist superpowers: The United States of America and the Soviet Union. The Soviet desire to test the physical limits of communism spread to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), also known as North Korea. North Korea was occupied by the Soviet Union while South Korea was occupied by the United States. As a result of these occupations, North Korea was subsequently “sovietised” and shortly after this sovietisation, North Korean and Chinese troops, supplied, trained, and armed by the Soviets, crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea. During the war, intense accusations and allegations were made against the United States and United Nations Forces, claiming that these participants were actively partaking in biological warfare against the communist troops. The three nations had varying reasons for these allegations. The Chinese government made these allegations as a retaliatory response to the positively increasing American Japanese relations. The DPRK accused the United States of biological weaponry to slow American advances by redirecting global attention to a possible war crime and to gain international support. The Soviet goal of these allegations was to back up the Chinese and Korean claims and undertake the responsibility of investigating these allegations. The American reaction to the allegations and the legitimacy of them will be

discussed in response. Overall, the goal of the allegations was to slow down American advances in Korea to aid the overarching goal of spreading communism through the Korean peninsula.

From July to August 1945, the United States, United Kingdom, and Soviet Union, held the Potsdam Conference in Potsdam, Germany. During this conference, it was agreed that the Soviet Union would occupy Korea north of the 38th parallel. A month after this occupation, the United States entered South Korea to secure and liberate the southern portion of the peninsula from Japanese control. The American occupation of South Korea was called “Operation Blacklist Forty,” which was carried out from 1945-1948. Among the Korean people, unity and independence were the dominant aspirations, however, “partition and joint occupation by the US and USSR are the governing factors in the political and economic life of the peninsula.”¹ Despite the original goals of the U.S. being that of liberation, The United States and Soviet Union’s occupation forces were the deciding factors in the Korean peninsula. Both the superpowers were “attempting to strengthen the political and economic organization of their own zones,” however, for different reasons.² The Soviet Union was strengthening the economic and political states of North Korea to prepare for an invasion into South Korea. The Soviet Union during the Korean War was technically not a direct belligerent; however, they *heavily* supplied and aided the North Korean and Chinese troops. The Soviet Union provided diplomatic, logistic, and tactical support as well as air force training. In a cable sent to Stalin on June 30, 1950, Kim Il Sung requested millions of cartridges, bullets, bullet and mortar shells, anti-aircraft cannon rounds, air force radios, and telecommunication devices, as well as spare aircraft parts and weapons.³ Five days

¹ Wilson Centre Digital Archive, Allied Occupation of Korea, 1945-1948, Central Intelligence Agency, digital Scan, January 3, 1947.

² Wilson Centre Digital Archive, Allied Occupation of Korea, 1945-1948.

³ Wilson Centre Digital Archive, Korean War, 1950-1953, Terenty Shtykov, digital translation, June 30, 1950.

prior to this cable message, North Korean troops invaded South Korea and four months later Chinese troops entered the war.

The allegations against the United States for use of chemical and biological weapons during the Korean War began in 1951. The primary allegations made by the three communist countries were claims that the U.N. Forces and U.S. were dropping insects carrying diseases and germ bombs on communist troops in Korea. Although the claims and goals were the same, the Soviet reasoning differed from the Chinese and Koreans. A successful claim against the U.S. for biological and chemical warfare meant the United States went against the legal standards for warfare established at the 1925 signing of the Geneva Protocol. If the Soviet Union could prove this, the U.S. would be sanctioned and investigated, and the Soviet Union and communist forces would have little resistance to their invasion of South Korea.⁴ These allegations were paramount in the communists' attempt to push the Americans out of the war. In an explanatory note from Lieutenant Selivanov to L.P. Beria, “[the allegations were] necessary in order to compromise the Americans in this war.”⁵ The allegations made by the North Koreans and Chinese were most definitely not disregarded, despite the lack of impartial investigations. The seriousness of the allegations was seen in the Soviet aid provided to the North Koreans and Chinese, when the Chinese requested 20 million doses of the live anti-plague vaccine and 20 million doses of the tetanus vaccine.⁶ The Soviets continued to support these allegations through propaganda pieces, such as a poster created in 1952 which reads “Остановить преступников!” Translated, this

⁴ See John Ellis van Courtland Moon, “Biological Warfare Allegations: The Korean War Case,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 666:1 (1992): 53-83.

⁵ Wilson Centre Digital Archive, Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations, Selivanov, digital translation, April 14, 1953.

⁶ Wilson Centre Digital Archive, Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations, Zhou Enlai, digital translation, March 10, 1952.

means “stop the criminals.” The poster contains a woman holding a newspaper which reads “here they are, Truman’s soldiers!” and “against bacteriological warfare” (See fig. 1).



Figure 1. Soviet poster of a woman holding newspapers with headlines titled “stop the criminals,” “here they are, Truman’s soldiers,” and “against bacteriological warfare.” The woman is pointing at a man holding a canister which is leaving a trail of black smoke and insects.⁷

The Chinese allegations made were the same as that of the Koreans; in late January to mid-February, Chinese troops in Korea noticed black flies, fleas, and lice in the snow. They claimed people were falling ill with cholera, typhus, typhoid, and encephalitis shortly after noticing these insects in the snow.⁸ Additionally, these were amongst the same diseases China experienced

during the Second World War. Mao Zedong claimed that top secret information and reports obtained “confirm that the American imperialists in Korea have systematically and deliberately disseminated the bacilli carriers”⁹ In this telegram sent from Beijing to Stalin, Mao Zedong linked the Americans to “three of the five prominent Japanese war criminals involved in

⁷ K. Ivanov and V. Briskin, “Stop US Criminals Biological Warfare Korean War,” digital scan poster, 1952. https://www.antikbar.co.uk/original_vintage_posters/propaganda_posters/stop_us_criminals_biological_warfare_korean_war/PP1910/.

⁸ Wilson Centre Digital Archive, Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations, Mao Zedong, digital translation, February 21, 1952.

⁹ Wilson Centre Digital Archive, Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations, Mao Zedong.

bacteriological warfare . . . [who took] equipment necessary to conduct bacteriological warfare, including bacilli carriers of cholera and plague.”¹⁰ When the Chinese government requested vaccines from Soviet Russia, propaganda posters were created to encourage the public to get vaccinated. A poster from the 1950s reads “人人防疫，粉碎美帝國主義的細菌戰!” Translated, this means “vaccinate everyone, to crush the germ warfare of American Imperialism!” (See fig. 2)

Figure 2.



Chinese propaganda poster created during the Korean War which pictures men, women, and a child receiving a vaccine. This poster is captioned “Vaccinate everyone, to crush the germ warfare of American Imperialism!”¹¹

Since the late 1800s, China and Japan have both had a traumatic history characterized by years of war, brutality, and humiliation. Consequently, Sino-Japanese relations had been poor for over half a century by the time of the Korean War. The Korean War was not the first time the Chinese had been attacked with biological weaponry. Led by Lieutenant General Ishii Shiro during the Second World War, biological weapons and

¹⁰ Wilson Centre Digital Archive, Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations, Mao Zedong.

¹¹ Wilson Centre Digital Archive, Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations, “Vaccinate everyone, to crush the germ warfare of American Imperialism,” Poster, 1950s.

bacteria factories were created for use against the Chinese. Imperial Japan had attacked Chinese civilians and troops with the plague, cholera, anthrax, and other diseases and experimented on Chinese prisoners of war.¹² All too familiar with biological attacks and the results of them, China was not hesitant to accuse the United States of biological warfare. By linking the Americans to confirmed Japanese biological warfare criminals, the allegations intensified and drew the attention of the international community.

The North Korean allegations mirrored that of the Chinese, as they agreed with the Chinese who claimed the U.S. were airdropping insects carrying diseases. The North Koreans used propaganda to soften the blow of American superior technology and to redirect attention to the Americans during the war.¹³ North Korean propaganda posters carried anti-American sentiments to garner public support and villainize western and capitalist countries. Through the use of propaganda, the North Koreans were able to keep the American politicians and diplomats on the defense, distracting them from the frontlines of the war. This effectively slowed the American forces in Korea. Chinese and North Korean troops working together advanced as far as the Gyeonggi-do province.

The United States government denied these allegations and claims, stating “categorically and unequivocally that these charges [were] entirely false; the U.N. forces have not used and are not using, any sort of bacteriological warfare.”¹⁴ In 1969, a letter sent to Congressman Kastenmeier, former President Harry Truman claimed he “did not amend any Presidential Order” in force regarding biological weapons, nor did “[he] at any time give [his] approval to its use.”¹⁵

¹² Sheldon H. Harris, *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare 1932-1945 and the American Cover-Up* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1995).

¹³ Conrad Crane, “Chemical and Biological Warfare During the Korean War: Rhetoric and Reality,” *Asian Perspective* 25:3 (2001): 61-83.

¹⁴ Dean Acheson, “‘Germ Warfare’ Charges Called Fabrication” *Department of State Bulletin* 26 (1952): 427-8.

¹⁵ Wilson Centre Digital Archive, Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations, Harry Truman, digital scan, July 25, 1959.

Despite these denials made by the former Secretary of State and former President, the United States did admit they stocked up on anti-crop agents but claimed these were their only biological warfare plans.¹⁶ The United States government denied these claims but they had deployed a news campaign which claimed they had the power to deploy chemical and biological weapons, with the hopes that they would deter the Soviet powers from deploying their own chemical and biological weapons.¹⁷ This news campaign was emphasized so heavily to the point that Joint Chiefs of Staff had believed they were in fact capable of these weapons, but they were not. When Vandenberg's biological warfare consultant was questioned about it, they responded there were "no practical capabilities in the field at this time."¹⁸

Despite the consistent denials of the allegations, the United States later confirmed the actions of the Chemical Corps. The Chemical Corps was formed to supply the army with retaliatory chemical capability and defensive equipment; however, this only fueled the allegations and controversy behind the denials.¹⁹ The three main communist powers during the Korean war claimed the Americans were using the Chemical Corps for offense, not defensive purposes. Another piece of evidence which contradicts the denials was the confirmation of the actions of the Chemical Corps. In 1950, the Chemical Corps began a full-scale construction of the nerve agent Sarin but was later shut down due to the discovery of a newer, more aggressive chemical.²⁰ Sarin is a lethal, odourless, and tasteless chemical that can cause death within minutes of exposure by interfering with the body's nervous system. During the Korean War, the

¹⁶ See John Ellis van Courtland Moon, "Biological Warfare Allegations" and Conrad Crane, "'No Practical Capabilities' American Biological and Chemical Warfare Programs During the Korean War," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 45:2 (2002): 241-9.

¹⁷ Conrad Crane, "'No Practical Capabilities,'" 246.

¹⁸ Conrad Crane, "'No Practical Capabilities,'" 246.

¹⁹ Department of the Army, "The 1950s: Heyday of the Chemical Corps," in *Medical Aspects of Chemical and Biological Warfare*, eds. Frederick Sidell, Ernest Takafuji, and David Franz (Washington, DC: Borden Institute, 1997), 47. <https://medcoe.army.mil/borden-tb-med-aspects-chembio-war>.

²⁰ Department of the Army, "The 1950s: Heyday of the Chemical Corps," 49.

Chemical Corps concentrated on the weaponization of Sarin and incorporated it into bombs prepared to be airdropped on the Korean War front.²¹ Two years after the Korean War, again, despite the claims they were incapable of chemical and biological weapons, the newer and more aggressive agent was designated the V-Series chemical. These agents were significantly more persistent, toxic, and referred to as “venomous,” as they would enter through the skin—bypassing gas masks.²²

There is still much controversy to this day surrounding the allegations and whether they were true or not. Today, North Korean and Chinese officials claim they had legitimate grounds for these accusations while others mention North Korean and Chinese officials had already admitted they were falsified in the past. Historians, such as Conrad Crane with the U.S. Army War College, believe there is the possibility that American evidence is still waiting to be declassified, which could completely change the narrative behind the allegations.²³ However, evidence from all three nations, do not just “suggest” these claims were false, they have confirmed them to be false. Russian operatives working with the DPRK government were confirmed to have faked the evidence. During the falsification they “[created] false infestation maps, [gathered] cholera and plague bacillus from infected people in North Korea and China [in which there was an epidemic already underway], injecting condemned prisoners with the diseases, and burying infected bodies that could be found to support the epidemic claims.”²⁴ In an explanatory note from Glukhov to Lavrentiy Beria, it is stated that, in order to prove the

²¹ Department of the Army, “The 1950s: Heyday of the Chemical Corps,” 49.

²² Department of the Army, “The 1950s: Heyday of the Chemical Corps,” 49.

²³ See Conrad Crane, “Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations Against the United States: A Playbook for the Current Crisis in Ukraine,” *US Army War College Articles and Editorials* 458 (2022): 1-13 and Conrad Crane “No Practical Capabilities.”

²⁴ Conrad Crane, “Chemical and Biological Warfare During the Korean War,” 67-8.

claims they were making, they created false areas of exposure.²⁵ When the claims were investigated and the North Koreans could not prove them, they attempted to cover up the false accusations by setting off explosions near the place the delegation was staying and setting off false air raid alarms.²⁶ When the communist governments became aware of the fact that they would not be able to prove the false allegations, the Soviet Union dispatched an emissary to Beijing and Pyongyang suggesting the Chinese and North Korean governments cease their accusations.²⁷ Wu Zhili, previous director of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army Health Division, admitted the case was a "false alarm."²⁸

The allegations made against the Americans during the Korean War were made with the goal of slowing down the American advances by diverting international attention to the possibility of a war crime. These allegations kept the American government and politicians distracted from the frontlines of the war. Soviet support to the North Korean and Chinese allegations assisted in this distraction, as the Soviets did not only provide logistic support, but they also provided vaccinations and investigated the accusations, which made the allegations only seem more plausible to the rest of the world. Pre-Korean War Sino-Japanese relations heavily influenced the Chinese allegations, as the Chinese already had a traumatic and intense history involving biological weapons. North Korea utilized the allegations as a way to push pro-communist and anti-American propaganda and continued to use these propaganda pieces to slow American and South Korean advances. The legitimacy of the allegations, from the perspective of the historical community, is ambiguous. On one hand, the Americans claimed they were

²⁵ Wilson Centre Digital Archive, Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations, Glukhov, digital translation, April 13, 1953.

²⁶ Wilson Centre Digital Archive, Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations, Glukhov.

²⁷ Kathryn Weathersby, "Deceiving the Deceivers: Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang, and the Allegations of Bacteriological Weapons Use in Korea," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin 11* (1998): 176-99.

²⁸ Wu Zhili, "The Bacteriological War of 1952 is a False Alarm," trans. Drew Casey, *Yanhuang Chunqiu 11* (2013): 36-9.

completely incapable of chemical and biological weaponry at the time but the actions of the Chemical Corps say otherwise. Historians argue there is the possibility that some American documents are still classified and, if declassified, might prove they did in fact use biological weapons but that is just a possibility. Despite the controversy surrounding the legitimacy of the allegations, it is undeniable that the communist countries have already admitted the claims were false.

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