

Understanding Biological Disarmament: The Historical Context of the Biological Weapons Convention

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Shortened version of proposal to AHRC

Research Context

The 1972 Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) played no role in the Cold War. At least this is the odd conclusion that must be drawn from the current historiography of the period. Despite being the first treaty to ban an entire class of weapons, the BWC gets no mention in most histories of the Cold War, or even of détente.¹ In just a few instances it is alluded to, an afterthought slipped between the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and the SALT I negotiations, relegated to simply “other important arms control negotiations” (Gavin, 2009), or listed as a small Soviet concession as they sought to maintain relations with the West in the face of USA-China rapprochement (Nelson 1995), or cited as an unverifiable nuisance that eventually contributed to disillusionment with arms control in the twenty-first century (Keylor 2003). This dismissal by historians belies the situation during the negotiations, when British negotiators were briefed to ‘fly the Union Jack’ from treaty drafts.² Indeed, the UK had initiated and played a prominent role in the treaty negotiations. Neither does it reflect opinion at the 1972 BWC parallel launch ceremonies in Washington, Moscow and London, when Nixon called the BWC a means towards the elimination of all warfare, and Heath declared it to be a “true disarmament treaty”. Nor does it represent perceptions a few years after the treaty entered into force when, following an outbreak of anthrax near a Soviet military facility at Sverdlovsk, UK Foreign Office officials wrote that, if the outbreak proved to be a breach of the BWC: “it will be the first occasion on which the Russians have been caught in violation of the central prohibition in an arms control agreement. The implications for other arms control agreements, and for East/West relations, are serious and far-reaching”.³

Currently, 170 nations are states parties to the *Convention on Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons* (its full title).⁴ According to one influential commentator, the core strength of the treaty has endured: “it does not merely limit or control: it abolishes.” (Sims 2009). Despite its significance, and proximity to the fortieth anniversary of its entry into force (1975), there is surprisingly little academic research on the origins of the treaty, still less reflecting up-to-date scholarship on détente that asks “how did the context of society at a given time shape policymakers? And how did policymakers shape society?” (Kochavi 2008). We aim to draw on a wide range of archival and oral sources to go beyond a blow-by-blow account of the technicalities of arms treaty negotiation, and instead provide a broad and deep historical account of the birth of the treaty. In short, we aim to write the BWC into Cold War historiography.

This resubmission incorporates reviewers’ comments on the original, which converged on three areas: clarify our contribution to wider understanding of the Cold War; clarify the role of - and support available - for the research fellow; devote more time to US fieldwork. Other minor changes are flagged throughout.

¹ Space does not allow full citations, but see e.g. Ball (1990), Bowker (1988), Froman (1991), Gaddis (2005), Garthoff (1994), Hogan (1995), Kunz (1994), LaFeber (2006), Loth (2002), Painter (1999), Sewell (2011), Schulz and Swartz (2010), White (1992).

² National Archives (TNA), FCO 66/299, Hainworth to Summerhayes (12 May 1971).

³ TNA, FCO 28/4025, Biological Weapons Possible Soviet Breach (17 March 1981).

⁴ Since submitting the proposal, the number increased from 165 to 170.

Previous work and its limitations

An extensive literature has grown alongside the treaty as both contemporary commentary and a history of its evolution (e.g. Sims 1988, 1992, 2001, 2009; Littlewood 2005). This sits alongside an even more extensive literature on the nature of biological warfare and its control (e.g. Dando 1994, Guillemin 2005, SIPRI 1971), together with a much smaller academic literature on the history of biological warfare (e.g. Balmer 2001, Wheelis *et al* 2006, SIPRI 1971). On the specific topic of the origins of the BWC there is little scholarship, far less that uses archival sources. Both SIPRI (1971) and Sims (1988, 2001) draw on United Nations documents to chronicle the record of negotiations up to 1970. Wright (2002) digs behind this chronicle, drawing on UK and US government archival sources to July 1968, whereas Chevrier (2006) uses similar sources to 1969 (UK) and 1971 (USA). A recent account by Walker (2012) focuses on certain episodes of negotiating history, but as with Sims, Wright and Chevrier, makes no more than cursory use of wider contextualising sources or oral history. Wilkinson (2009) has a PhD chapter that examines the intelligence available on the Soviet BW programme during the BWC negotiations.

Together, these few accounts outline the broad political contours of the route to the final treaty. The UK and USSR, in September 1959, put proposals for programmes of disarmament that would encompass both chemical and biological warfare to the UN General Assembly, which passed them to the Ten-Nation Disarmament Committee for detailed discussion. Momentum was later sustained by breakthroughs in nuclear arms limitation, namely the Limited Test Ban Treaty (1963) and later the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) (1968). Against this momentum, the use of tear gas by the US in Vietnam rendered CBW issues especially sensitive. The role of academics in keeping CBW in the spotlight, whether in developing a scholarly literature on disarmament or through NGOs such as the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, is mentioned largely in passing in existing accounts. Existing secondary literature takes us chronologically through key events: a Hungarian proposal to the UN calling for all states (especially the USA) to comply with the 1925 Geneva Protocol; a UK policy review and Draft BWC produced in July 1969; the impact of a Soviet draft convention in September 1969 that proposed prohibitions on development and production of both chemical and biological weapons; the announcements by President Nixon that the US would unilaterally abandon their biological and then toxin weapons; a further Soviet draft proposal turning back on its insistence of a singular chemical and biological weapons treaty thus paving the way for the US to negotiate on the basis of this text.

Our current understanding of these events and their wider significance is limited in several ways and so the historical examination we propose here will not simply be a detailed account of the technicalities of arms treaty negotiation. The historical roots of the BWC are intimately bound up with Cold War concerns, particularly: Anglo-American relationships; nuclear and chemical weapons policy; varying attitudes to US chemical agent use in Vietnam; the different obligations and interpretations of the Geneva Protocol; and the complex roles of experts, both scientific and social scientific, individual and collective, civil and military, in shaping events. In this respect:

- Existing accounts give an adequate overview, but leave crucial gaps in description and analysis. For example, given subsequent widespread criticism that the BWC is unverifiable, we can only conjecture why the British government, who championed the BWC, accepted the removal of its verification measures from the negotiating text. Also, we have scant accounts of the foundations of discussion about the BWC; of newly released

documents from UK and US archives covering the negotiation period; and of the period until the BWC's 1975 entry into force (during which the issue of *chemical* weapons policy in the light of the BWC remained outstanding).

- Many potentially important direct and indirect influences on the BWC have not been explored. For example, the negotiators of the NPT and BWC were the same; the influence on treaty negotiations of uses of tear gas in Vietnam and poison gas in Yemen (1967) remains unexplored, as does the influence of defence cuts in a broader economic context.
- Existing accounts are only suggestive about the influence of non-governmental groups such as Pugwash and the Bernal Peace Library; the thinking of individuals such as Hedley Bull, the international relations scholar, turned director of the Arms Control Disarmament Research Unit of the Foreign Office; and the actions of scientist-advisers such as Sir Solly Zuckermann (see below).

Research Questions, Aims and Objectives

By addressing the gaps and research problems outlined above, we suggest that a more thorough historical account based primarily on UK and US sources (see methods) would contribute far more than added layers of empirical detail to existing analysis. Our study will also illuminate wider dimensions of Cold War history, which are of broader historiographical significance:

1. *What was the wider significance of the BWC? What was at stake for different groups in negotiating the BWC?*

As noted, existing Cold War historiography makes little connection to the significance of the BWC. In particular, by examining UK sources, we can explore if – as with the NPT – British involvement was regarded as 'a solid indication of a continuing contribution to East-West détente' (White 1992).

2. *How did chemical, biological and nuclear weapons issues interact during the Cold War?*

These are often treated as separate areas for historical analysis; we will contribute to recent scholarship that has started to attend to crucial links between these areas (eg Balmer 2010, Walker 2012).

3. *What was the influence of expert groups and individuals, both inside and outside government, on shaping arms control and disarmament policy?*

Returning to Kochavi's (2008) earlier quote about new intersections between social and diplomatic history, our project will build on new approaches that point to the important role of experts and social movements, alongside politicians and civil servants, in shaping defence policy (eg Edgerton 2006, Moore 2008).

In answering these questions, we will make a significant contribution to one of the six main aims of the **AHRC/RCUK Global Uncertainties Programme** (countering the proliferation of biological weapons) by setting current approaches in a richer historical context (see Dissemination below).

Methods and Sources

The primary source of information will be documents including UK and US government sources, supplemented by sources from beyond government. We have identified the following as relevant to this project and will continue to scope further archival sources if the proposal is supported:

National Archive, Kew – papers preceding, during and following negotiations (mid-1950s to 1970s) in CAB, FCO, WO and DEFE are of particular significance.

Sussex-Harvard Information Bank (SHIB), University of Sussex is an extensive archive of material on CBW.

US National Archives, Washington DC – also material (some on-line) on national security from the **Nixon Presidential Library and Museum**.

US National Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington (sources include an on-line document collection: “Nixon Administration's Decision To End U.S. Biological Warfare Programs”)

Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs archive – papers relating directly to the BWC are held at SHIB (above); wider context will be sought through access to the Pugwash archive.

The Marx Memorial Library, London holds the records of the **Bernal Peace Library**, which took an active role in highlighting CBW issues during the late 1960s.

Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) archives, LSE, London. By the late 1960s CND protests increasingly centred on CBW research; while the bulk of the CND archive pertains to nuclear matters, it is likely that some relevant material could be traced.

Zuckerman archive, UEA, Norwich. Solly Zuckerman was Chief Scientific Adviser at the Ministry of Defence (1960-1966) and Chief Scientific Adviser to the British Government (1964-71). He remained heavily involved in discussions about CBW disarmament. The archive includes his papers and personal correspondence.

Documentation can provide details of policy development including insight into the reasoning and deliberation behind decisions and alternative routes considered. Oral histories offer the possibility of further insights into the meanings that actors associated with events (Ritchie 1995). In our original submission one reviewer suggested that we carry out extensive oral histories. However, many senior figures involved in policy discussions and decision-making are deceased. Several people who were junior at the time, but still involved directly or indirectly in the process, could still provide valuable contextual information. We will interview approximately 10-12 people to provide thematic information on different ways in which biological disarmament was framed. The number was arrived at after consulting the HSP database of c.1,500 contacts, which gave some indication of who might still be available to talk.

To supplement these interviews, first-hand accounts will be gathered through a ‘witness seminar’. Here, a mixed group of academics, practitioners and ‘witnesses’ are presented with preliminary findings of historical research and invited to offer their perspectives. Witness seminars thus offer access to communal (though by no means consensual) recollections, tempered by ‘real-time peer review’ (Tansey 2007). Because of the sensitive nature of the subject, the seminar will be held under Chatham House Rule. The researchers have experience of organising such events and we will organise a witness seminar with 4-5 key witnesses and a small invited audience.

Although the UK and US were central in maintaining the momentum for the BWC negotiations, a study that also involved Soviet sources would be fascinating but unfeasible. The archives remain closed. We will include international participants in the interviews and witness seminar to help broaden the scope of the research.

Project Management

The proposed project lends itself to the complementary skills and expertise of the team. Balmer and McLeish both have experience of grant management at PI and

Co-I level. Balmer is an internationally recognised expert on the history of CBW, with much experience of archival research, qualitative interviewing, and organizing witness seminars. McLeish’s work with HSP provides a strong link between this historical project and contemporary issues in biological weapons control. She is a senior researcher with a background in history and philosophy of science, who has undertaken projects on the governance of dual-use technologies in the CBW environment, the role of civil society in CBW governance, and historical research on past offensive programmes. In response to an earlier referee’s comment that we need a general Cold War historian, we will advertise with a preference for a postdoctoral fellow with a broader background in Cold War history in order to complement existing expertise within the team.

Timetable	
Months	Activity
1-3	Scoping Sources
2-24	UK/US Archives; Interviews; Dissemination Planning
10	Workshop: ‘BWC at 40’
10-36	Analysis/Interpretation/Writing; Dissemination
19	Witness Seminar
31	Stakeholder Symposium

The project will be overseen by an Advisory Committee drawn from a range of stakeholder organisations from academia, Government and the third sector. As well as a resource to help guide research activities (including ethics), the committee will help ensure that dissemination activities are oriented towards maximising opportunities for user engagement and communication.

The UCL Department of Science & Technology Studies is an internationally recognised centre for the integrated study of history, philosophy and social studies of science. Balmer works within (and the RF will join) the departmental research cluster on *History of Twentieth Century Science and Policy*, which constitutes a critical mass of researchers in this field. HSP is a world-recognised leader in the field of CBW arms control research. It is a long-standing inter-university collaboration for research, communication and training in support of informed public policy towards CBW. The Program links research groups at Harvard and Sussex Universities.

Dissemination

This research will produce an academic monograph on the historical context of the BWC. A workshop will produce an edited collection of material on the ‘BWC at 40’ in journal or book form. Journal articles (e.g. *Cold War Studies*, *Cold War History*, *Diplomatic History*, *British Journal for History of Science*) and conference papers will be targeted at specific audiences including: Cold War historians, historians of science, and contemporary security studies.

Countering the threat of biological weapons proliferation ranked amongst the highest risks identified in the 2010 *UK National Security Strategy*. We are committed to producing outputs that are accessible and useful to policymakers and other non-academic audiences. Initial research outputs will be ready for the 40th anniversary of the entry into force of the BWC (2015) and annual meetings in Geneva following the BWC’s Seventh Review Conference. Dissemination to non-academic audiences is detailed in the Impact sections, but include: stakeholder event to mark the 40th anniversary of BWC; policy briefing papers; project web-site; witness seminar; and

our advisory panel. Impact monitoring will involve follow-up questionnaires, phone calls and visits to event attendees and recipients of outputs from the project.

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