

# Understanding Biological Disarmament:

## The Historical Context of the Origins of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### About the Project

This final report provides a brief overview of *Understanding Biological Disarmament: The Historical Context of the Origins of the Biological Weapons Convention* - a four-year project (2013-2017), funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which set out to study the historical context of the origins of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). Our research goes beyond a blow-by-blow version of negotiations in order to provide a far deeper and richer historical analysis of the context and conception of the BWC - a treaty that was tied to and yet, strikingly distinct from, the Cold War.

This project was jointly coordinated by researchers from the Science and Technology Studies (STS) department at University College London (UCL) and the Harvard Sussex Program at the Science and Technology Policy Research Unit (SPRU), University of Sussex. There was also a project advisory board with members from both academic and non-academic institutions (see previous page).

### Key Findings

Our research has led to several key findings concerning:

- The continued role of the 1925 Geneva Protocol
- The importance of different types of expertise
- The role of the UK relative to other nations in BWC negotiations
- The inseparable nature of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) issues
- The isolation of the BWC from wider geo-political matters
- The role of the media and civil society to keep the public aware of CBW issues
- The characterisation of the BWC as a historically unique entity.

### Outputs and Events

A number of outputs were produced by this research project, including several journal papers, chapters in edited collections, online media pieces, briefing notes and discussion articles.

The project team gave several talks as well as participating in a number of workshops and conferences, including the Eighth Review Conference of the BWC and 40th anniversary ceremony of entry into force of the BWC. The team organised two workshops for academics, government and civil society groups on the relationship between history and security issues. We also carried out a witness seminar with a panel of people who were involved in chemical and biological weapons control issues at the time the BWC was being negotiated.

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

### Context

Outlawing an entire class of weapons is a major step towards creating a safer world. Just over forty-five years ago, on 10 April 1972, the first ever such step was taken as the nations of the world were invited to sign the new Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). This treaty, which had been several years in the making, sought to ban biological weapons, or more colloquially germ warfare. As such, the BWC was remarkable for attempting not simply biological arms limitation but full disarmament. Three years later the treaty entered into force in international law. Currently the BWC has 178 States Parties and six Signatory States (July 2017).

Despite its significance, there is surprisingly little scholarly research on the origins of the BWC, still less on how this treaty was shaped by its broader political and social context. Perhaps more strikingly, most scholarship on the Cold War ignores the BWC. *Understanding Biological Disarmament* therefore aimed 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 deep historical account of the birth of the treaty.

### Filling in The Gaps

The historical roots of the BWC are intimately bound up with the Cold War and other wider 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 1925 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, prior to the project:

- Existing accounts gave an adequate overview, but there remained crucial gaps in description and analysis. In particular, there was scant account of the foundations of discussion about the BWC, the negotiation period, or the period until the BWC's 1975 entry into force.
- Many potentially important direct and indirect influences on the BWC had not been explored. For example, the full influence on treaty negotiations of the uses of tear gas in Vietnam remained unexplored.
- Existing accounts of the BWC were only suggestive about the influence of non-governmental groups such as Pugwash, religious organisations and the Bernal Peace Library.

By addressing the gaps and research problems above, we proposed that a more thorough historical account based primarily on UK and US sources would contribute far more than added layers of description to existing analyses. In short, our study sought to write the BWC into the historiography of the Cold War and, in particular, the period of détente.

Our research mainly involved archival work and amassed an indexed database of c.10,000 .jpeg files of relevant historical documents.

## KEY FINDINGS

### **The continuing influence of the earlier 1925 Geneva Protocol (GP).**

This ran through all considerations when proposing and negotiating the BWC. Throughout it was recognised that any arms control initiative would have to take into account the GP's parameters, particularly where use was concerned.

**The significant roles and requirements of very different types of expertise.** These were instrumental in bringing the BWC to fruition, namely those of scientific, legal and diplomatic experts.

### **The role of the UK relative to other nations in ensuring the BWC was negotiated.**

The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) wanted to show the BWC as a British success story and generate positive publicity on the back of this achievement. At the UN, the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee / Conference of the Committee on Disarmament provided a forum for many nations to air their opinions and offer suggestions and drafts. So, what began as a British treaty, and was ultimately co-sponsored by the USA and USSR, nevertheless received much input from other members in the drafting stages.

### **The wider inseparability of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) issues.**

This happened despite their technical separation within the expert communities. As a result, other CBW issues typically dominated debate, often relating to the Cold War. The status of tear gas (and herbicides) garnered much attention and publicity

because of their use in Vietnam and the debate in the UN. This issue was arguably more immediate but is frequently associated in public discourse with both chemical *and* biological weapons.

### **The isolation of the BWC from wider geo-political diplomacy.**

The BWC was tied to, and yet strikingly distinct from, the Cold War. The planning and subsequent negotiation of the BWC happened in a compartmentalized fashion to the other business of government and diplomacy. It did not form an integral part of discussions with other countries or feature in high-level general foreign policy briefings.

### **The role of the mass media and civil society in keeping the issue of CBW control in the public eye.**

Civil society played an important educational and advocacy type role. It pushed for CBW disarmament and engaged the public, drawing on individuals with technical and legal knowledge. Press reporting of CBW issues and disarmament was fairly regular, although not front page news necessarily. Likewise, specialist civil society organisations like the Bernal Peace Library held meetings and some local and regional organisations, like the British Council of Churches, maintained an interest in disarmament.

### **The characterisation of the BWC as a historically unique entity.**

The BWC should not be seen as a Cold War product *per se* but rather a long-term development with continuing relevance today.

## OUTPUTS

### Journal articles

- Brian Balmer, Caitriona McLeish and Alex Spelling, ' "Preventing 'A Virological Hiroshima": Cold War Press Coverage of Biological Disarmament', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 2016, 9(1): 74-90, (Gold Open Access).
- Alex Spelling, '"Driven to tears": Britain, CS Tear Gas and the Geneva Protocol, 1969-75', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 2016, 27(4): 701-725, (Gold Open Access).

### Edited collections

- Jean Guillemin, Matthew Meselson, Julian Perry Robinson and Nicholas Sims, 'Witness Seminar: Origins of the Biological Weapons Convention', in Lentzos ed., *Biological Threats in the 21st Century*, (Imperial College Press, 2016).
- Marie Chevrier and Alex Spelling, 'The traditional tools of biological arms control and disarmament', in Lentzos ed., *Biological Threats in the 21st Century*, (Imperial College Press, 2016).

### Online media

- Alex Spelling and Brian Balmer, 'Remembering an Overlooked Treaty'. *Guardian Science Blog*, March 26, 2015.
- Alex Spelling, Brian Balmer and Caitriona McLeish: 'The Geneva Protocol at 90: An Anchor for Arms Control'. *Guardian 'The H-Word' History of Science Blog*, June 17, 2015.
- Caitriona McLeish, Alex Spelling and Brian Balmer: 'The problems

of prohibition: chemical weapons and the Syrian conflict'. *History and Policy*, Opinion Articles, May 30, 2016.

### Briefing Notes

- Alex Spelling, Caitriona McLeish, Brian Balmer (2014), *Where Did the BWC Come From? Indicative Timeline and Key Events 1925-1975*.
- James Revill, Caitriona McLeish, Alex Spelling, Brian Balmer (2016), *Options for Article X*.

### Discussion Articles

- James Revill, Caitriona McLeish, Alex Spelling, Brian Balmer, 'International Cooperation Under Article X of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention', *Trust and Verify* (VERTIC), 2016 154: 1-5.

### Future Outputs

We have a publication pipeline of journal articles and book chapters planned: on the role of the WHO; the connection between reservations to the 1925 Geneva Protocol and the BWC; the BWC and US decision to ratify the 1925 Geneva Protocol; and the role of NGOs. All of these forthcoming outputs will become the 'back-bone' for a longer monograph on the historical context of the BWC.

## EVENTS

### Academic Talks

Staff on the project have given talks about this research at various academic events, including:

- **'Science Policy: Research at the Boundary'** workshop, University of La Laguna, Tenerife, Spain, 21 October 2016.
- 4S/EASST Conference on **'Science and Technology by Other Means: Exploring Collectives, Spaces and Futures'**, Barcelona, Spain, 31 Aug-3 Sep 2016.
- **'Science/Technology/Security: Challenges to Global Governance'**, workshop. University College London, 20-21 June 2016
- **'Conflict, Trauma and the Media'** conference, Liverpool John Moores University, 31 March 2016.
- **Global Health Histories Seminar 88**, World Health Organisation (WHO), Geneva, Switzerland, 21 May 2015.
- **War Studies Department** lunch time seminar series, Kings College London, 18 November 18 2014.
- **Transatlantic Studies Association** annual conference, University of Ghent, Belgium, 7-10 July 2014

### Conferences, Workshops and Seminars

- **Workshop on History and the uses of chemical and biological weapons: Opportunities and challenges for future academic research**, University of Sussex, 22-23 May 2017. 25 experts from academia, government, civil society in a round-table format.
- **Eighth Review Conference of the BWC**, Geneva – 9 November 2016, side event showcasing this AHRC project and to launch a new edited collection *Biological Threats in the Twenty-First Century* (in which two chapters are the result of research from this project).
- **OPCW Advisory Board on Education and Outreach**, Global

developments in education and outreach relevant to the Convention, 5 October 2016. Dr Caitriona McLeish presented on the role of history in engaging students and practitioners with the issue of preventing re-emergence of chemical weapons.

- **Preparatory Conference for the Eighth Review Conference of the BWC**, Geneva, 11 August 2016, Drs Caitriona McLeish and James Revill gave a briefing on the topic of Article X of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC).
- **Workshop on History, Security and Arms Control**, 22 June 2016, UCL, London. 50 attendees from academic, government and civil society groups heard talks and participated in discussion on the relevance of history to current security issues.
- **90th anniversary of the Geneva Protocol**. During the 2015 Meeting of States Parties of the Biological Weapons Convention, Geneva, 14-18 December 2015, Dr Caitriona McLeish presented at a side event organised by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) entitled 'The Geneva Protocol and the BWC: Some Notes from History'.
- **40th anniversary of the BWC** in Geneva, 30 March 2015. The project team attended the ceremony and Dr Caitriona McLeish gave a presentation entitled: 'The 40th anniversary of the BWC - remembering the origins of the Convention'
- **Witness Seminar** - held at the University of Sussex on 10 October 2014. A panel discussed and recorded their recollections of the mid-1960s and 1970s when the BWC was negotiated, signed and came into force.

## RESEARCH TEAM

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Report Design: Charlie Norrell  
Front Picture: The Conference on the Committee on Disarmament at work at the Palais des Nations at Geneva (1969). The Lederberg Archive, Courtesy of the US National Library of Medicine.

Back Picture: Courtesy of the National Archives, Kew.

