

Department of Science and Technology Studies



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SPRU – Science Policy Research Unit

Briefing Note

# Where Did The Biological Weapons Convention Come From? Indicative Timeline and Key Events, 1925-75

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## BWC Indicative Timeline and Key Events: 1925-1975

**June 17, 1925:** At the Geneva Conference for International Arms Traffic (under the auspices of the League of Nations) a suggestion by France to build upon earlier treaties which sought to prohibit the use of gases in warfare, such as the 1899 and 1907 Hague Agreements, is extended at Poland's request to include bacteriological (biological) weapons.

This leads to the drafting and signing of 'The Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the use in Warfare of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare'.

When signing the Protocol a sizeable fraction of its parties reserve the right to retaliate in kind if chemical and/or biological weapons should ever be used against them by enemies or allies of enemies. This, and the contractual character of the Protocol, renders it a no-first-use agreement.

**February 8, 1928:** The 'Geneva Protocol' (as it becomes known) enters into force and is eventually considered part of customary international law.

**February 10, 1947:** The Paris Peace Treaties are signed with Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Italy and Romania and include provisions limiting possession of CW.

**October 23, 1954:** The Modified Brussels Treaty, which creates the Western European Union, is signed with the accession of West Germany which agrees to a ban on any production of atomic, chemical and biological weapons on its territory.

**May 15, 1955:** Austrian State Treaty signed which also contains prohibitions on production of atomic, chemical and biological weapons on its territory.

**November 20, 1959:** The United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopts resolution 1378 on 'general and complete disarmament'. This follows proposals made by the UK on September 17 and the USSR on September 18 at the UN Disarmament Commission, proposals which include CBW disarmament. Responsibility is passed to the newly created Ten-Nation Disarmament

Committee in Geneva for further discussion.

**January 12, 1962:** The US and South Vietnamese Militaries begin using herbicides and defoliants (Project Ranch Hand) against the National Liberation Front (NLF) to impact on food supplies and jungle foliage. Riot-Control-Agents are supplied to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) for use in civil disturbances and against the NLF.

**March 15, 1962:** The USSR submits to the newly created Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee (ENDC) at Geneva, a Draft Treaty for 'general and complete disarmament' which includes provisions to ban CBW, thus keeping the two weapons interlinked.

**1966:** With the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam, some international criticism is directed towards the US for the use of RCAs and herbicides. At the 21st session of the UN General Assembly, Hungary introduces a draft resolution stating that their use in warfare is prohibited by the Geneva Protocol and international law. The US responds that the Geneva Protocol does not apply to nontoxic gases and chemical herbicides.

**December 5, 1966:** Amendments introduced to the Hungarian draft resolution by the US, UK, Canada and Italy leads to UN resolution 2162B, which calls instead for 'strict observance by all states of the principles and objectives of the protocol'. It also notes that the ENDC has the task of seeking an agreement on the cessation of the development and production of CBW.

**1968:** Discussion on updating the Geneva Protocol continues within the ENDC.

**August 6, 1968:** At the ENDC UK Disarmament Minister, Fred Mulley, tables a working paper, based on work done by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) Arms Control and Disarmament Research Unit (ACDRU) and Atomic Energy and Disarmament Department (AEDD), on the prohibition of Microbiological Warfare. The ENDC recommends to the General Assembly that the Secretary General appoint a group of

## BWC Indicative Timeline and Key Events: 1925-1975

experts to study the effects of the use of BW.

**December 20, 1968:** The 23<sup>rd</sup> session of the UN General Assembly adopts resolution 2454A which requests the Secretary General to prepare a report on the problems of CBW, in accordance with the ENDC report, in time for consideration at the 24<sup>th</sup> session.

**January 29, 1969:** The UN Secretary-General requests the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) to co-operate with the 'UN Group of Consultant Experts on CBW' in the preparation of a report on the health aspects of these weapons.

**April 1969:** William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, writes to US President, Richard Nixon, asking that he resubmit the Geneva Protocol for ratification.

**April 6, 1969:** US President, Richard Nixon, writes to the ENDC and mentions CBW control as one of six possible objectives for international agreement.

**April 30, 1969:** US Defence Secretary, Melvin Laird, suggests that the National Security Council (NSC) initiate an inter-agency review of the US CBW programme.

**May 28, 1969:** US President, Richard Nixon, initiates a multi-agency review of US CBW policies known as National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 59.

**July 1, 1969:** UN Experts Report on CBW is published. In the forward, UN Secretary-General, U Thant, recommends accession to the Geneva Protocol for unsigned / non-ratified countries; a clear affirmation that the Geneva Protocol covers the use in war of all CBW, including RCAs and herbicides; and states that prospects for general and complete disarmament would be strengthened by the elimination of CBW from military arsenals.

**July 10, 1969:** UK tables first draft of a 'Convention for the Prohibition of Biological Methods of Warfare' to the now renamed Conference of the Committee on Disarmament (CCD). The term 'biological' is adopted as it encompasses a wider number of potential agents and uses. The

proposal receives a mixed response with some agreeing and others disagreeing with the separation of chemical and biological weapons.

**September 19, 1969:** Bulgaria, Byelorussian SSR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, Ukrainian SSR and the USSR submit to the UN General Assembly a 'Draft convention on the prohibition of the development, production and stockpiling of chemical and biological (bacteriological) weapons and on the destruction of such weapons'

**November 25, 1969:** Having reviewed NSSM 59, US President, Richard Nixon, publicly announces that the US will cease production of and destroy offensive BW stockpiles; renounces US first use of lethal and incapacitating CW; and pledges to resubmit the Geneva Protocol to the US Senate for ratification.

**November 28, 1969:** The WHO submit their report entitled, 'Health Aspects of Chemical and Biological Weapons', to the UN Secretary-General. It states that such weapons pose a special threat to civilians and that the effects of their use are subject to a high degree of uncertainty and unpredictability.

**December 16, 1969:** At the 24<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly, resolution 2602E declares the 1970s a 'Disarmament Decade' and requests that all governments "intensify without delay their concerted and concentrated efforts for effective measures" relating to the cessation of the nuclear arms race and the elimination of all other weapons of mass destruction.

At the same session 21 nations introduce resolution 2603A which declares any use of CBW in warfare as contrary to international law as embodied in the Geneva Protocol. Ultimately, resolution 2603B is adopted which reaffirms resolution 2162B and calls upon all nations to accede to / ratify the Geneva Protocol. It also acknowledges the UK draft BW convention.

**February 2, 1970:** Following earlier domestic, international and media scrutiny concerning the attitude of the UK government towards the coverage of RCAs

## BWC Indicative Timeline and Key Events: 1925-1975

under the Geneva Protocol, and much internal deliberation, Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart, replies to a Parliamentary question by stating that 'CS smoke' and 'other such gases' were outside of the scope of the Geneva Protocol in the UK's opinion.

The announcement leads to criticism of the UK position in the CCD with some arguing that this weakens the Geneva Protocol and questions are asked about the sincerity of the UK's approach to CBW disarmament.

**February 14, 1970:** US President, Richard Nixon, extends the US BW ban to include toxins.

**February 17-September 3, 1970:** Discussion at the CCD continues to focus on the CBW separation issue.

**March 17, 1970:** In a statement to the CCD, Mr Eschauzier of the Netherlands recalls that when they ratified the Geneva Protocol in 1930, the Netherlands became "among the first countries to renounce unilaterally the use of bacteriological or biological weapons".

**March 24, 1970:** In a statement to the CCD, Canada states that it does not possess now and has no intention in the future to develop, produce, acquire, stockpile or use biological or toxin weapons.

**April 7, 1970:** In a statement to the CCD, Lord Chalfont, UK Disarmament Minister, recalls his December 9, 1969 statement to the UN General Assembly's First Committee, to state that the position of the UK government is "simple and straightforward. We have never had any biological weapons, we have none now and we have no intention of acquiring any".

**April 29, 1970:** Swedish Ambassador, Alva Myrdal, informs the CCD of a recent message to the Swedish Parliament given by her government that "Sweden does not possess, nor does it intend to manufacture any biological or chemical means of warfare. Research work is being carried out to develop protective methods in the event of our country being attacked by such weapons".

**August 18, 1970:** UK tables a revised draft 'Convention for the Prohibition of Biological Methods of Warfare' which includes (at the suggestion of the US) a prohibition on toxins.

**August 19, 1970:** US President, Richard Nixon, submits the Geneva Protocol to the Senate for ratification consideration (with herbicides and RCAs exempted).

**August 25, 1970:** Joint memorandum on the question of chemical and bacteriological (biological) methods of warfare, submitted to CCD by Argentina, Brazil, Burma, Ethiopia, India, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sweden, the United Arab Republic and Yugoslavia

**October 23, 1970:** A revised draft Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Chemical and Bacteriological (Biological) Weapons and on the Destruction of Such Weapons is submitted to the General Assembly by Bulgaria, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and the USSR.

**December 7, 1970:** The 25<sup>th</sup> session of the General Assembly recommends that the CCD continue its consideration of CBW and to submit a report to the Assembly for its next session.

**March 30, 1971:** At the CCD, the USSR and the socialist countries reverse their position on separation and table 'Draft Convention for the Prohibition and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) Weapons and Toxins and on their Destruction' in place of their earlier CBW disarmament proposals.

**April 15, 1971:** In the US, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee advises that the Geneva Protocol be ratified "without restrictive understandings" or postponed until this is possible.

**July 6, 1971:** At the CCD, Swedish Ambassador, Alva Myrdal proposes that the Soviet Draft Convention should cover toxins. Toxins are now included in the definition of Article 1 alongside the general statement 'whatever their origin or method of production'.

## BWC Indicative Timeline and Key Events: 1925-1975

**August 5, 1971:** The US and USSR (in the name of the seven Socialist Group countries) table two identical (separate) draft Conventions in the CCD. Greater negotiating momentum is now achieved.

**September 28, 1971:** The 'Revised Draft Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction', co-sponsored by Bulgaria, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Italy, Mongolia, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, USSR, UK and US, is forwarded to the UN General Assembly.

**December 16, 1971:** After unsuccessful attempts by the First Committee of the UN General Assembly to amend the CCD's text, UN General Assembly resolution 2826 is passed which among other things, advises the depository powers, the UK, US and USSR, to open the convention for signature and ratification.

**April 10, 1972:** The BWC opens for signature at ceremonies in London, Washington D.C. and Moscow. Needing 22 countries to deposit their instruments of ratification with the depository powers in order to come into force, within 1 year 115 countries have signed and begin domestic ratification procedures.

**August 10, 1972:** BWC submitted for ratification to US Senate (but held in abeyance pending resolution of the Geneva Protocol issue).

**February 8, 1974:** In the UK the 'Biological Weapons Act' is given Royal Assent and enters into domestic law.

**December 10-12, 1974:** Renewed effort launched by US President, Gerald Ford, to obtain Senate ratification of the Geneva Protocol.

**December 16, 1974:** In the US, the Senate votes its approval of the Geneva Protocol and BWC.

**January 22, 1975:** US President, Gerald Ford, ratifies the Geneva Protocol and BWC.

**February 11, 1975:** The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet ratifies the BWC.

**March 12, 1975:** With the BWC extended to all dependent territories, UK Foreign Secretary, James Callaghan, signs and completes the UK ratification process.

**March 26, 1975:** Instruments of ratification signed, exchanged and deposited at ceremonies in London, Washington D.C. and Moscow: the BWC enters into force internationally.



## What is this briefing note?

The aim of this briefing note is to provide a short, accessible overview of the origins of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). It is not a detailed history of the treaty negotiations but presents key events and some contextual information. The research project is a work in progress and any suggestions for further entries to the timeline are welcome. It is intended for anyone who wants to place contemporary issues about the control of biological weapons in this historical context.

## About The Project

This briefing note is based on an academic research project 'Understanding Biological Disarmament: The Historical Context of the Biological Weapons Convention', based at University College London, UK, Department of Science and Technology Studies and the University of Sussex, UK, Harvard-Sussex Program.

The project draws on archival work and oral history and aims to place the origins of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention in its broad historical context.

The project is funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and runs from September 2013 to August 2016.

**The project web-site is**  
**[www.ucl.ac.uk/sts/cbw](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/sts/cbw)**

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