

Book Review

Mark Wheelis, Lajos Rozsa and Malcolm Dando, *Deadly Cultures*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006

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Deadly Cultures has been edited by three leading authors, Mark Wheelis, Lajos Rozsa and Malcolm Dando. The seventeen chapters have been authored by experts in the field of biological weapons. Mostly authors have written about biological weapon programme in their own countries. Important among them are- US, UK, Canada, France and Soviet Union. They draw from primary sources to trace the history of offensive biological weapons programmes in various countries from the post WW-II period, and until its termination. The book further probes the programmes of countries like Iraq and South Africa that have allegedly pursued offensive biological weapons programmes even after the end of WW-II.

The book addresses two critical themes related to the issue of why countries initiate offensive biological weapons programmes and the changing role of biological weapons, *vis-à-vis* other weapons. The perception about biological weapons and in that sense, their military utility, has been in a flux. In the early times of the Cold War, biological weapons were considered to rival nuclear weapons in strategic importance. However, soon they lost prominence as far as strategic planning was concerned, to again re-emerge in the present international security discourse, given the inevitable link between biological weapons and non-state actors.

The authors cite a spectrum of reasons for the initiation of a biological weapons programme by countries. The two reasons for the initiation of the US programme were – arguments bolstered by deterrence theory and the conviction that the US must be prepared to retaliate. John Moon demarcates the US programme (which

began in 1945) with the year 1969 as the benchmark. In 1969, the US policy shifted from offensive to defensive biological research. The US biological weapons efforts were a part of its concern for 'preparedness', lack of which would tantamount to weakness in a nation's armor. According to Moon, the crucial factors that paved the way for US renunciation were normative and moral concerns.

The UK biological weapons programme too was a 'preparedness' measure directed at and in response to the threat posed by a German or Soviet programme. According to Brian Balmer, out of all the countries under study, the British biological weapons programme was the most significant in terms of scale, scope and degree of integration with the state.

Rejecting popular theorizing of the Canadian biological programme as having been an appendage of the powerful tripartite allies of World War II, Donald Avery observes that, it was dependent on the US programme only for practical reasons and thus, ran its own course. When it comes to France, apart from the early eight years (1948-1956) of biological weapon research, they have received less attention as compared to nuclear weapons. The Soviet interest in offensive biological warfare has been traced to the year 1928. However, no authentic accounts were available to estimate the scope, integration and authenticity of a Soviet biological weapons programme.

The reason for the Iraqi biological weapons programme, according to Graham Pearson, was perhaps an extension of the chemical weapons programme. The South African programme, with its initiation in 1981, its secretive nature and problems related to its destruction in a politically unstable phase, poses an insightful future case study in many of the issues related to biological weapons.

The role of the communist influence in Warsaw Pact Countries that led to the initiation of biological weapons research is also mentioned in the book. At the end of World War II, Non-Soviet Warsaw Pact countries – Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, German Democratic Republic and Bulgaria carried on offensive biological weapon programmes by involving local scientists, conducting military research and assassinating political dissidents with biological agents.

This book was written with a view to generate an informed public debate and create a base for informed public policy decision, thereby, contributing to the overall biological disarmament regime. The book also throws light on new and emerging biological weapons agents like anti-crop and anti-animal agents and provides an overview of the disarmament process as well as the threat of terrorism that has been linked to biological weapons.

The reader is left grappling with the issue of the advancements in biological sciences and its application for development as also security. In conclusion, it is hinted that the barriers to obtaining necessary materials and knowledge skills for development of biological and chemical weapons are fast diminishing, thereby, increasing the prospects of bioterrorism. However, the book does not delve into the issues of how to address this problem. At the outset, the readers are reminded of the paucity of research and archival material available on the insidious biological weapons field.

Overall, *Deadly Cultures* fills a critical gap that exists in the literature on biological weapons, by providing a thorough account of the offensive programmes by drawing basically from primary sources.