

Book Review

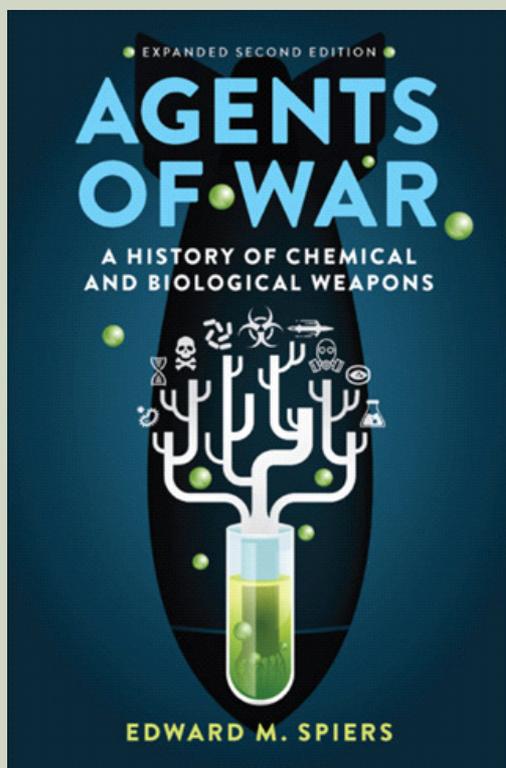
Agents of War: A History of Chemical and Biological Weapons

Author: Edward M Spiers

ISBN: 978-1-78914-298-3

Gunjan Singh

Dr Gunjan Singh is an Assistant Professor at the OP Jindal Global University.



Biological and Chemical Weapons have a very special place in the scheme of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The debate surrounding the use and production of these weapons has always intrigued the masses. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a renewed interest globally about the feasibility and effects of biological and chemical weapons. With the outbreak of newer diseases and breakthroughs in technologies this debate around biological and chemical weapons will continue to intensify. Every time an outbreak occurs on a large scale the fears of it being biological warfare or have been artificially induced gains momentum. The fears are justified given the history of biological attacks.

The book 'Agents of War: A History of Chemical and Biological Weapons' attempts to answer some of the important questions surrounding these weapons, pertaining to their development, use, effectiveness and detection. It provides a detailed narrative about the history of chemical and biological weapons. The challenges and the advantages of using these weapons have also been discussed in the book. The author rightly states, "Chemical and biological weapons arouse a peculiar degree of ire and passion, so much so that unlike many conventional weapons they have been subject of various attempts to ban their development, production and usage" (pp. 11).

The book covers in detail the use of chemical and biological weapons in the Middle East and the challenges faced by organizations trying to establish the credibility of these incidents. It is a known fact that in case of use by any state or non-state actors, one of the major challenges has been establishing with certainty that any chemical or biological weapon was used. The author argues, "It's

research, development and production in Iraq had exposed the limitations of Western intelligence monitoring and the difficulties of on-site inspection” (pp. 127).

One of the interesting chapters in the book is one discussing the use of biological and chemical weapons for ‘political assassination and poisoning’. The author covers a range of incidents in the past and recent times to argue that such actions are a result of state-sponsored efforts. One of the major states, which has actively used such means has been Russia. The chapter also juxtaposes the challenges which such state-sponsored acts bring to the domestic security of the country where the assassinations take place. It also asserts the limitations in the preparedness of the countries regarding monitoring the movement of chemical and biological weapons and their safe elimination. Such acts also underscore the argument that the dissidents do not feel safe, and they can be singled out and eliminated anywhere. Such acts also strengthen the argument that chemical and biological weapons can be successfully employed for covert operations.

However, it’s not only for wars or assassinations, chemical and biological weapons have also been used for domestic security. For instance, chemical weapons play a useful role in challenges like crowd control, riot control etc. Because they prove to be useful for such acts, there has been further research and development on these chemicals. But there is a fine line between the use of chemical and biological weapons as the lethal and non-lethal modes of weapons. However, it is not very difficult to transform them into lethal weapons.

The book also argues that though chemical and biological weapons may not always be the weapons of choice or primary weapons in any conflict or war, they can successfully be used as a force multiplier. They help in

demoralizing the enemy army as well as the population. Even then there have been very few prominent instances where they have been successfully used, the reason being ethical issues and also there have been challenges with successful delivery mechanisms. Biological and chemical weapons efficiency depends on a number of external factors (wind, rain, sunlight, terrain, temperature, etc.) and thus they are not perceived to be as accurate as conventional weapons. The author states, “However effective tactically, as chemical weapons undoubtedly were in one-sided Third World conflicts, where the victims often lacked any means of defence and still less of any ability to retaliate-in-kind, the political costs often seemed to outweigh these tactical benefits” (pp. 89).

The book does cover almost all the aspects of debate surrounding the issues related to chemical and biological weapons. The development challenges, the challenges associated with the Chemical Weapons Convention, lack of delivery mechanisms, and also the incidents where these weapons have been used by non-state actors (Aum Shinrikyo), all have been covered in detail. However, one keeps waiting for something new to be discussed and highlighted. The book does a good job of covering the Iran-Iraq War in detail and also Desert Storm and the recent incidents of use of these weapons in Syria. The book is a good addition to the existing literature on the topic and will provide a good source of information for scholars and students interested in chemical and biological weapons. The author rightly concludes by saying, “....aspirations to acquire these weapons are likely to endure as long as the technology keeps opening up new possibilities for their development and usage” (pp. 221). It is these aspirations and easy access to the technologies which continue to make chemical and biological weapons an attractive option for state as well as non-state actors.