



Vladimir Pasechnik

Defector who alerted the west to the danger of Soviet biological weapons production

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Vladimir Pasechnik, the germ warfare expert who first alerted western intelligence about the extent of clandestine research into biological weapons in the Soviet Union when he defected to Britain in 1989, has died aged 64. He described a network of secret laboratories, disguised as a commercial organisation called Biopreparat, which employed several thousand scientists and technicians to develop potential biological weapons that could spread diseases like anthrax, ebola, Marburg virus, plague, Q fever and smallpox.

His revelations prompted President George Bush and prime ministers Margaret Thatcher and John Major to challenge Mikhail Gorbachev about violations of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, which banned the production and use of biological weapons. Pasechnik's disclosures had an important influence on the later assessment of Iraq's ability to make bioterrorist weapons with knowledge obtained through its links with Moscow.

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After his defection, he worked for 10 years at the Department of Health's centre for applied microbiological research at Porton Down, Wiltshire, before forming his own company, Regma Biotechnologies, to develop new drug alternatives to conventional antibiotics; its first target was a treatment for tuberculosis.

Pasechnik was born in Stalingrad; his parents died in the fighting that destroyed most of the city during the second world war. He studied physics and biology at the Leningrad Polytechnic Institute, where he was among its brightest stars. His research career began with an investigation of the biological uses of polymers at the Institute of High Molecular Compounds, in Leningrad. In 1974, the Soviet defence ministry, the driving force behind almost all civil and military research, offered him a chance to run his own biotechnology laboratory.

Pasechnik had an unlimited budget to equip it and recruit 400 of the best scientists, supposedly to ensure that basic research in microbiology in the Soviet Union would compete with the best in the west. Not until after the laboratory was up and running did the truth dawn on him. Instead of creating a state-of-the-art centre for basic research, he had become part of a vast network of laboratories and factories producing deadly weapons.

His laboratory was nominally involved in developing vaccines and new methods of crop protection. In practice, he was directed to develop equipment and production methods for a biological weapons programme for Biopreparat, which had been created in 1973 as a cover for the military chemical and biological weapons programme.

After a Biopreparat research unit in Obelensk developed a more deadly strain of pneumonic plague in 1985, Pasechnik's laboratory, the Institute of Especially Pure Biopreparations, was asked to refine the process for weapons production. By 1987, the Soviets had the capacity to make 200kg of super plagues every week, enough to kill 500,000 people.

Because of their short shelf lives, these agents were apparently produced only on a scale sufficient for testing. But the Biopreparat network stood ready to begin production of biological agents of this type, known as weapons of special designation, which were built into military planning for use as a last resort.

Pasechnik reported that the institute also carried out research on modifying cruise missiles to spread germs. Flying low, in order to foil early-warning systems, the robot craft were intended to spray clouds of aerosolised pathogens over unsuspecting enemies. He said his team had succeeded in producing an aerosolised plague microbe that could survive outside the laboratory.

Pasechnik defected while attending a scientific conference in 1989. He told interviewers he was unaware for a long time that his work violated the 1972 treaty, under which the US and the Soviet Union were to halt such activities, and repeatedly attempted to get some research switched to the civilian purposes he had originally intended. He said he had become increasingly distressed with the biological weapons programme, the existence of which was denied by Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin.

Doubts about the USSR's compliance with the treaty had been fanned in 1979 by a suspicious outbreak of anthrax at Sverdlovsk. Western experts never accepted the official line that blamed the resulting 68 deaths on contaminated meat. They suspected a leak from a microbiology laboratory, which later proved to be accurate.

Pasechnik's story added to the suspicion. But, as little was known about him in the west, his information was, at first, treated with caution, though it did enable John Major to confront Gorbachev in a heated exchange in Moscow in 1991, reportedly with the words, "We've got the goods on you!" His evidence was confirmed by another well-placed defector, Kanatjan Alibekov, the chief scientist of Biopreparat, who arrived in the US in 1992.

Pasechnik is survived by his wife Natasha, two sons and a daughter.

• Vladimir Pasechnik, biophysicist and biological weapons expert, born October 12 1937; died November 21 2001

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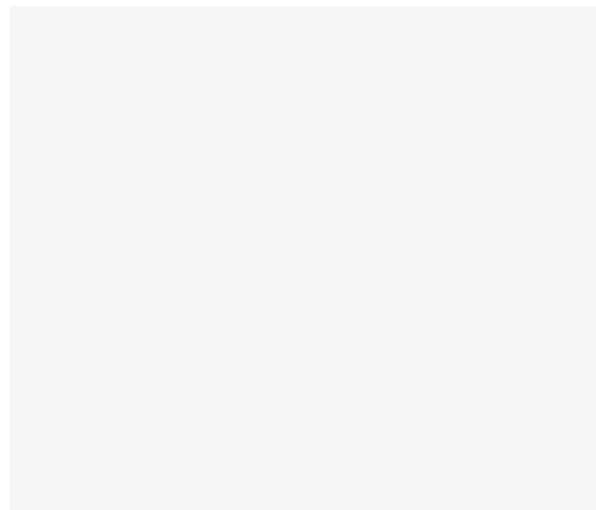
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