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Tibor Méray, 'Germ Warfare: Memories and Reflections'

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Summary:

Tibor Meray reminisces about the biological warfare allegations during the Korean War.

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Tibor Méray:

Germ Warfare

Memories and Reflections[\[1\]](#)

The aim of this workshop is to analyze new evidence on the Korean War and to examine unanswered questions. Being a writer rather than a scholar, I would like to start on a personal note. It may sound strange but, personally and subjectively, the first and foremost question that remains unanswered for me, even today, is this: Why was it I who became entangled in this Korea story?

Let me begin at the beginning. I graduated from the Budapest University in September 1946, majoring in Hungarian and Latin literature. Next day I was married and on the following day I took up employment in the editorial office of the central daily of the Communist Party, Szabad Nép (Free People). For a year I was learning the profession, then in the fall of 1947, at the age of twenty- three, I was appointed editor of the cultural section of the newspaper. From that point onward I was kept busy with cultural topics, theatre, cinema, literature, music, fine arts, and education. At the same time I also wrote a few film scripts.

On the afternoon of July 21, 1951 the telephone rang on my desk. You can imagine how surprised I was when the head of the party's AGITPROP, who was previously my Editor-in-Chief, asked me what opinion I had of Kaesong. I gave a vague answer—until then I had no dealings with foreign politics, my work kept me busy for fourteen to sixteen hours a day and, at the most, I might have glanced over the headlines of articles that were about foreign affairs. I probably said something like "It is an important place." The reply was as follows: "The reason why I have asked you is because you have to go there on the first available plane. You will be sending reports about the armistice talks."

The shock left me breathless. Until then I had only been abroad twice, to neighbouring Czechoslovakia to attend film festivals. No Hungarian correspondent had ever been to Korea, and, by the way, not even to the People's Republic of China which at that time was not quite two years old.

If I may quote what the great statesman, Winston Churchill, said of Korea in 1953: "I'd never heard of the bloody place until I was seventy-four." Well, at that time I was twenty-seven. (I would like to ask the Korean participants who are present here: please do not be offended! They or their parents would have heard almost nothing about Hungary until 1956. Small countries are condemned to the fate that only wars, revolutions and natural disasters make them known in the world)

I had to prepare for the trip in a great hurry. My weatherproof coat was worn out and I had no time to buy a new one. I planned to buy one in Moscow while waiting for the connecting flight to Beijing. After my arrival there I went to the famous GUM department store. A staff member of the Hungarian Embassy came with me since I did not know Russian. They had suitable coats in the store but there were hundreds of people lining up to buy one. This was not quite as I had imagined the country of "achieved socialism". However, the person who came with me told the people in the line that I was on the way to Korea so they let me go ahead of them. I was witness to the fact that in the Soviet bloc the name "Korea" was some sort of a magic word.

Half a century has gone by since this, and I have been through many things. I have found answers to many questions and have not found answers to many others. For instance, I now know that it was the North Koreans who asked the European communist countries to send correspondents to Kaesong so they could show the UN correspondents that there were Europeans on their side, too. The one thing that I will

never understand until my dying day: why, in Hungary, was it I who became the "chosen one"?

I have to admit that my introduction is not altogether innocent. The organizers of today's workshop, Mrs. Kathryn Weathersby and Mr. Christian Ostermann asked me to talk about the germ warfare. (Tomorrow, at the Korea Society's conference, I will talk about my other Korean experiences) Well, in the telling of the story of my departure to Korea I would like to show what an inexperienced, green person I was when I wrote about the germ warfare. I was not conversant with international politics and was even less knowledgeable about issues such as warfare related to bacteria. This may sound like a preliminary apology. Well, it is!

On the other hand, I can give an exact account of how I became involved in the germ warfare issue. I was in Kaesong on February 22, 1952 when the Foreign Minister of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea stated that from January 28, the American interventionist army had started germ warfare against the Korean People's Army, the Chinese volunteers and the peaceful Korean population, in order to cause mass destruction. This statement was confirmed two days later by the Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China, Zhou Enlai.

I was horrified. This was an astounding announcement. At the same time I did not see that it had anything to do with me as a correspondent, after all I had been sent to cover the armistice negotiations at Kaesong (by then at Panmunjom).

A week later I received a telegram from my editorial office. It contained a question that was meant to be a reproach. How is it possible that I am sitting in Kaesong where nothing is happening when the whole world is buzzing with news about germ warfare?

On March 2 I travelled from Kaesong to Pyongyang. I will give you a brief account what I saw and heard in the North.

In a half-ruined building that housed the Ministry of Health I spoke with the Deputy Minister then with the Minister himself. They told me in detail how the Americans were waging germ warfare. The Minister showed me a map of North Korea which had twenty two red circles on it: these were the places where, up until that day, germ warfare attacks had been made—mainly along the front and on the Western half of the country.

A number of scientists also participated in the conversation. They led me into a nearby laboratory. Countless bottles and boxes were there, in them were hundreds or thousands of various insects. They said that peasants, village communal committees, health groups and soldiers had sent the insects there.

They stood me behind a microscope and showed me all sorts of preparations. They stated that these had been obtained from flies, fleas, centipedes and fish that American planes had dropped. They added that the strange oval-shaped creatures that I was looking at were cholera bacteria. They also showed plague bacilli. They remarked that not 'all insects and fish were contaminated—this was part of the American trickery. The Americans wanted to create the impression that the emergence of these insects in winter was a natural phenomenon.

All this impressed me. Still, I said that I would like to see a germ attack in real life, rather than insects in a laboratory.

I did not have long to wait. A few days later they took me to look at something on the

spot in a little village called Sono-ri. The village people related that on the night before February 28 American planes circled above the village, for a long time and at a low altitude, without dropping bombs. Next morning a peasant found eight small heaps of flies on the ice of the Daedong River. They were alive, crawling and flying about and they soon spread over an area of several hundred meters. The inhabitants of the village spent four days exterminating them by burning dry wood and corn husks.

They took me to the river. There were black stripes on the white ice, marks of a bonfire. I did not see any sign of life. I was probably at the twentieth such place when I noticed moving spots. They were hundreds of flies. They were alive and were crawling on the ice, slowly staggering. At one place the sunshine had melted the ice into a puddle. About six or eight flies were swimming in the dirty water. This happened ten days after the peasant mentioned above found them.

The Central Laboratory in Pyongyang showed that the flies were contaminated by cholera. I asked how the flies remained alive in temperatures of minus 5 to minus 10 degrees Celsius. They told me that these flies were a special strain that were bred especially for the purpose of germ warfare. They also explained to me why the flies were dropped in Sono-ri. The Daedong [Taedong] River flows from Sono-ri toward Pyongyang. The waterworks of the capital was located between Sono-ri and Pyongyang. Therefore if the drinking water were to be infected at Sono-ri then the drinking water of Pyongyang would be also infected. It would cause mass death.

Another shocking experience was in store for me, two or three days later in Pyongyang. They took me to the central district of the capital, to Building No.6 in Street Number 2 of Namnun-ri District. Before this I received a cholera immunization. I had to put on a rubber outfit from head to toe, trousers up to my chest, a jacket with a hood which went right down to my eyes, long black boots and long gloves. They tied a white operating theater gown over my rubber suit and a surgical face-mask over my nose and mouth.

A thick seagrass rope was around the block of houses where we went and armed sentries stood next to the rope. No one was allowed to enter or leave this area without special permission.

At this place a grieving couple told me that on the night before March 5 American planes dropped five small piles of flies that fell in their courtyard. Near to them were oblong-shaped white envelopes and South Korean leaflets. The couple set off to work early morning while it was still dark. The flies were found by their two children, one aged six, the other aged two and their sixty eight year old grandfather. Although the grandfather was cautious about the insects, somehow they still touched them. Next day they became ill and died. A laboratory test showed that the flies were infected with cholera.

This is as much as I can relate about my personal experiences. I saw what I saw. Whatever I heard as an explanation I believed and wrote down. What happened to me was exactly the same as happened later to members of the International Scientific Commission who investigated the germ warfare in Korea and who were much more experienced and better qualified than I was. I believed because I wanted to believe. I trusted those who gave me the so-called scientific information just as this Commission did. A member of the Commission stated: "We felt so sure of the integrity of our Chinese hosts that we entirely trusted statements which they made regarding American use of germ warfare. The scientific foundation of the Commission's work consisted of the fact that the delegates implicitly believed the Chinese and North Korean accusations and evidence."

I have to say that my belief was shaken not by Korea but by events in Hungary. Not

long after my return to Hungary I realized the extent of the crimes of Stalinism that had been committed in my country and the mass of lies that covered these crimes. At this stage simple logic led me to the history of the Korean War. I asked myself whether they had told me the truth about many things, including the germ warfare. I knew the similarity between the two regimes. The parallel caused me to be filled with doubts. However, in Budapest, I was unable to get at the proof.

I fled to the West after the 1956 Revolution. The Voice of America radio station sought me out virtually in the first moment, while I was still in Vienna. They asked me to issue a statement saying that the germ warfare was a lie. I replied that I could not say that I did not see what I saw. The most I could do was to have doubts about the explanations of what I saw. However, until I was able to substantiate my doubts I was unable to speak. "So you still believe in it?" was the rather aggressive question. "I have written and talked for too long about something based on belief. Now I want to find facts," was my reply.

Only science could provide help to find answers to my doubts. Early in 1957, after I arrived in Paris, I sought out the specialist scientists who were considered the best in France: the director of the Pasteur Institute, the head of the cholera section of the same Institute who was the director of the International Institute of Epidemiology, the head of the Entomology Institute, the head of the Bacteriological Department of the University of Medicine and the best known biologist in the country who was also a member of the French Academy. I told them in detail everything that I had seen and heard in Korea. All these meetings lasted several hours and they listened to me with great patience.

I gave an account of their replies in a series of articles in a daily called *Franc-Tireur* in May 1957. There is not enough time to talk here in detail about these articles. I only wish to outline the opinions quoted in them. The French scientists all acknowledged that the campaign aimed at the general public was very cleverly orchestrated as far as propaganda was concerned. While I was relating my experiences to the biology professor Jean Rostand, the member of the French Academy, at one stage he interrupted me saying: "If you keep on with this story even I will believe it!"

At the same time they all found details that were absurd from a scientific point of view. There were such factual errors as made the entire concept unacceptable. One of the scientists pointed out the fragility of the vibrio, or Asiatic cholera bacterium. In temperatures of minus five to minus ten degrees it is impossible to spread an epidemic with this vibrio. According to the opinion of the director of the Pasteur Institute it would be possible to infect a smaller group, for instance, the General Staff, but on a country-wide scale it would be hazardous even to those who employed this warfare. The opinion of the cholera-specialist director of the Epidemic Prevention division of the Pasteur Institute was that the immunization that I received immediately before I visited a house in the Namnun-ri district in Pyongyang was worthless. Two injections are required against cholera, seven days apart. First 4 billion units then the second time 8 billion. Furthermore, these immunizations become effective only five days after the second injection. The most direct statement was made by Professor Seguy, director of the Entomology Institute, who had studied flies for 45 years. "Using flies in germ warfare is impossible" he said. "Flies can spread cholera where it already exists, transmitting it from infected feces. However, flies cannot hold the bacteria longer than half an hour. Also they cannot, for this purpose, be dropped from a height in paper envelopes. They would perish while falling down,"

I would like to add that the international prestige of Professor Seguy was such that the report of the International Commission for the Investigation of Facts Concerning Bacterial Warfare in Korea and China contained five references to his books. The professor knew this report, he had it in his library earlier on. However, when I visited him he did not have it any longer. "It was all nonsense. I threw it out," he said.

There was a common element in the view of the French scientists. This was evident in a series of questions rather than a statement. Was I present when the flies were dropped on Sono-ri? Did I see the planes actually dropping the flies? Did I see when the cholera bacteria were found? Was I present to the end during the laboratory examinations? Was I present when the insects were dropped on the courtyard in Pyongyang? Did I see who dropped them? Did I see when the old man and the children touched the insects? Was I present when the corpses were taken into the laboratory? And when samples were taken from them? And when they found cholera bacteria in the samples?

Of course, these questions sounded somewhat rhetorical but, essentially, if anything could be substantiated in these accusations made by the North Koreans and the Chinese, it could only be verified if someone followed through every instance from the beginning right to the end.

Incidentally, this was the point where the French professors' interpretation coincided with that of the International Scientific Commission. The Commission's report drew up an ideal scheme, a complete series that, according to its members, would be a source of perfect evidence. This scheme starts with airplanes and then involves containers, the creatures that were dropped, the meteorological situation and bacteriological examinations right up to the establishment of the illness. The report notes at this place: "Naturally, a complete series of proofs could only be found very rarely or never." The Commission itself never followed through such a series and never referred to an individual who would have done so. Thus the term "very rarely" evaporates from the Report and all that remains is the word "never". The Scientific Commission itself, with this fact, qualified the scientific value of its own Report.

I would like to add to this, as an anecdote, that members of the Commission of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, who were also busily investigating the germ warfare in Korea, were taken to the Daedong River, the same place where I had been taken earlier. Where I saw flies, the Report of this Commission mentions "ant-like insects." The laboratory that told me about cholera bacteria informed the Lawyers' Committee that they found "bacteria which caused a disease of the intestines". The two can be hardly the same. This is not all. This Committee was taken to Pyongyang, to House No.6 in Street No.2 in the Namnun-ri district, the same place where I had been earlier. The Committee's Report, regarding this inspection, reads as follows: "In Pyongyang City (as mentioned above) two persons fell ill on March 6th and another on March 8th. Two of them died on March 8th." You will remember that I was told that three persons died. I can only be glad that one remained alive out of the three, even though I will never know whether this fortunate third person was one of the children or their grandfather. I hope that in actual fact all three of them!

When information gathered on the spot was so unreliable and scientific investigations did not substantiate anything, then, according to the simplest logic, we are talking about an invention. With very few exceptions, the opinion of the whole Western scientific community was similar to that of the French scientists. It is another matter that the campaign of hatred that was based on the propaganda of germ warfare was particularly effective in the West, more precisely, in Western Europe. As for the only positive outcome of this propaganda: it was an unimaginably thorough campaign for hygiene that I witnessed both in Korea and China. Due to time limits I am unable to go into details about this.

A big question remains: Who invented the story about the germ warfare?

I have to tell you straight away: I don't know the answer and as far as I know no one has been able to say with certainty who it was.

I would like to attempt an exercise, using the method of elimination.

I find it inconceivable that the campaign started "from below". I have seen many campaigns which started from below": The Stakhanov system, the "Socialist work competition" offered for Stalin's seventieth birthday, the so-called "Peace government bonds" offered "voluntarily" to be deducted from wages. All these "from below" campaigns, which were started off with great enthusiasm, came into existence by reason of the Political Committee of the Communist Party having decided it at the top.

Could the leadership of the Korean communist party have been the initiator? Theoretically it could. More so because there is an unclear factor that up until this day remains to be solved. The accusation of germ warfare was first heard not in February 1952 but nine months earlier. On May 8th 1951, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Korea sent a cable to the President of the United Nations Security Council, stating that the US forces in Korea had used bacteriological weapons during the period of December 1950 to January 1951 and had spread smallpox. This accusation had been maintained for a few weeks then suddenly vanished—until February 1952. Therefore it was the North Koreans who came up first—just as in February 1952—with the topic of germ warfare. Why they became silent for several months is a mystery. However, it can be taken with certainty—if one knows the Soviet-North Korean relationship—that the North Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs could not have sent a cable such as this to the UN Security Council without Soviet permission or instigation. I think that North Korea can be eliminated from the initiators.

Now the Chinese and the Russians are left. A Chinese initiation appears to be less likely in light of the North Korean cable in May 1951. Also making it less likely is that the first accusation was followed by a noncommittal attitude by the Chinese. This contrasted with the North Korean statement in February 1952 when only two days later Zhou Enlai also joined in protest, in the name of the Chinese government. In my opinion neither this second North Korean statement could have been made without Soviet permission or instigation, nor Zhou's protestation made without a preliminary harmonizing with the Kremlin. On the other hand, to support the theory of Chinese instigation I can quote a personal experience. As I have mentioned, I had talks with the deputy Minister for Health, then with the Minister for Health in Pyongyang in March 1952. The first meeting was on March 6th. The deputy minister then told me the following, literally: "It was the Chinese volunteers who first informed us about the bacteriological attack when they reported that they had found unusual insects." Three days later, on March 9th, the minister asked me, that in any report I might write about this matter, to not mention Chinese volunteers but soldiers fighting on the front. This episode suggests that in February 1952 it was the Chinese who suggested to the Koreans to raise the charge of germ warfare.

Even if we do not exclude the Chinese as the initiators of the 1952 germ warfare accusation the role of the Soviets still remains to be investigated.

They are the most difficult to catch. As far as the Korean War was concerned, they made an effort to present themselves to the outside world as remaining in the background, or at least in the second or third row from the front. They supported the accusation of the germ warfare, echoed it, at home and also at international forums; they also supported the so-called investigating committees which were in fact dependent on them—but as if they had nothing to do with the whole affair. However, perhaps they were not as innocent as they chose to appear.

In this propaganda campaign it was stated—and unfortunately it was true—that the American government had granted immunity to certain persons who, during the Japanese occupation of China, directed a program of biological warfare. They were General Shiro Ishii and several of his collaborators. The immunity they received was in exchange for information gathered from them. However, it is also true that several members of General Ishii's group became the Soviets' prisoners in Manchuria and twelve of them were tried by the Russians in December 1949 in Khabarovsk.

Therefore the Russians had at their disposal, beside their own experimental results in germ warfare, material gained from the Japanese officers. This is an important factor because the North Koreans and the Chinese (who had been in power only for two years) were at that stage unlikely to be in possession of sufficient material to enable them to build up a charge of germ warfare, or to compose a 650 page document which was published by the International Scientific Commission—given that the science was mixed with pseudo-science. We can deduce from this that the Soviets were either the instigators or that they participated, right from the beginning, in formulating the charges—or perhaps they did both.

There is another circumstance that is not without interest. I was still in Hungary in the spring of 1950 when the communist leadership raised a charge against the US, stating that they had wanted to ruin the country's potato crop by using Colorado beetles. Similar accusations were heard in Czechoslovakia and Poland. It more than probable than these accusations originated from a central source, namely from Moscow. It was a fundamental factor in the whole Soviet AGITPROP mentality to make the West, and first of all the US responsible for difficulties encountered in any area whatsoever. Has the potato crop failed? This is because of the American Colorado beetles. There are difficulties with Tito? It is the Americans who stand behind Tito. Do they intend to make purges within the communist party? The Titoist conspirators must be unmasked, tried and executed and the Americans must be accused because they are the ones who direct their puppet, Tito. Is there a danger of epidemic breaking out in North Korea and China? Before the outbreak of an epidemic, or before the epidemic becomes widespread we must point an accusing finger at the Americans. This mentality at that time, in 1950, pervaded the young China much less than was the case with the Soviets. This is another indication that the idea to raise the accusation of germ warfare could have originated in Moscow.

Finally something more. While I was writing my series of articles in Paris I unearthed two curious facts. In the joint sittings of the Soviet Communist (Bolshevik) Party's Central Committee and Central Control Committee, on January 7, 1933, Yosif Vissarionovich Stalin stated, in connection with the criminal activities of certain Soviet citizens: "They organize wrecking activities in the collective and state farms and some of them, including certain professors, go to such lengths in their zeal to destroy as to inject the germs of plague and anthrax into cattle and on the collective farms they help spread meningitis among horses, etcetera". In 1937-38, during the show trials an accused person confessed "to manufacturing virulent bacteria in three separate factories in order to destroy herds of Soviet swine". Another defendant admitted that "he had connived with Japanese intelligence to infect the Red Army with highly virulent bacteria in the event of war".

Stalin, therefore, had an old and favorite idea: the accusation of germ warfare. As far as I know he was the first politician in the world who formulated these kinds of charges, pre-dating the North Koreans and Chinese by more than ten years. I do not consider impossible that it was the same Stalin who remembered this idea during the Korean War.

All these are, naturally, presumptions. Fifty years have gone by but I do not know of anyone who has found irrefutable evidence. It is a grotesque situation that while we are searching our minds the solution is perfectly simple. It would be sufficient for a safe to be opened in Moscow or Beijing and we would know everything. Few secrets have been revealed in Beijing but many in Moscow. However, these revelations have been, without exception, in connection with internal affairs, party-matters of the Communist bloc; after all, conflicts with Belgrade or Beijing can also be traced back to the internal affairs of the relevant communist parties. Gorbachev may come, Yeltsin, too, Putin after him, but in the realm of foreign policy the Kremlin does not reveal many secrets. Why? How can we interpret this in any other way than that Russia continues to accept the legacy of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, with all its faults and crimes? Asking this question and establishing this fact causes one to think

and suggests a prospect rather disquieting to contemplate!

(Translated by Christine and William Hyde)

[\[1\]](#) An amended version of Tibor Méray's reflections was published in The Korea Society Quarterly 3 (Fall 2000): 10-11, 44-45.