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## The Plan that Never Was Churchill & the “Anthrax Bomb”

*A BBC Myth—By JULIAN LEWIS*

LAST SUMMER, a sensational allegation was widely reported by the British press (and then echoed internationally, not least in the German newspapers): CHURCHILL GERM RAID PLAN DISCLOSED (*The Guardian*); HORROR BID TO END WAR (*The Sun*); BLITZ OF POISON—CHURCHILL PLANNED TO BOMB GERMAN CITIES WITH ANTHRAX (*Daily Express*); CHURCHILL PLANNED ANTHRAX BOMB RAID ON GERMANY (*Daily Telegraph*). All these headlines derived from a BBC television feature programme (*Newsnight*, transmitted on 1 May 1981), and all of them were wrong.

This passage from the broadcast, and I take it from the BBC transcript, shows how its tone was demagogically set from the beginning:

PETER SNOW: . . . “I suppose it’s only natural that the British like to think that whatever the Nazis stooped to during the Second World War at least we tried to maintain standards of conduct which set us apart from the tyranny we were fighting. But *Newsnight* has uncovered evidence of a terrible weapon invented, developed and tested by British scientists during those dark days of the early 1940s, and even today, forty years on, if you venture too close to the test site you too could still fall victim to a deadly disease.”

Apparently, then, Wartime Britain had done something to place herself on a par with Nazi Germany. But what could this possibly be? In the report by Robert Harris which followed, the answer took a long time in coming.

Most of the *Newsnight* feature simply related how the British germ warfare programme developed, rightly indicating as its motivating force the

fear of a German biological attack. The deadly effects of anthrax were spelt out—this being the disease on which research was concentrated by scientists at Porton, near Salisbury, from August 1940. A detailed account was also given of the testing of an anthrax device on a small Scottish island nearly two years later, and of the continuing contamination of that island up to the present day. Yet there was nothing fundamentally new, or scandalous, in these revelations. As the obituarists of Paul Fildes, the principal bacteriologist involved, had noted in a memoir published in 1973<sup>1</sup>:

“That much of the war work at Porton has now become declassified is evident from the publicity given in television programmes to the experiments on Gruinard Island. Tourist trips from Ullapool round the ‘forbidden island’ are advertised as a holiday attraction.”

One such programme had been broadcast by the BBC itself in April 1967. An account based upon it had appeared in print in 1969, naming anthrax as the agent used on Gruinard and quoting the then Director of the Porton centre as predicting no reduction in the level of contamination for a further hundred years.<sup>2</sup>

It was only in the closing stages of the *Newsnight* report that the screw began to tighten. Robert Harris’s emphasis shifted from eyewitness accounts of the nature and development of biological weapons to what was claimed to be documentary evidence of an intention to initiate their use. The viewers were told how America developed the British discoveries as a result of inter-Allied cooperation. It was also revealed that in 1944 Churchill approved a proposal to order 500,000 anthrax bombs from the United States government. However, the purely defensive rationale for this step was not referred to, though clearly set out by the Prime Minister when he took it on 8 March:

<sup>1</sup> G. P. Gladstone, *et al.*, “Paul Gordon Fildes”, in *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society* (1973), Vol. XIX, p. 337.

<sup>2</sup> R. W. Reid, *Tongues of Conscience: War & the Scientist’s Dilemma* (1969), pp. 307–8.

"... I have had most secret consultations with my Military Advisers. They consider, and I entirely agree, that if our enemies should indulge in this form of warfare, the only deterrent would be our power to retaliate."<sup>3</sup>

Nor had his thinking changed by 21 May, when he directed his military advisers—the Chiefs of Staff—to take over responsibility in this field from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. To his personal representative on the CoS Committee, Lieutenant-General Sir Hastings Ismay, he wrote:

"As you know, great progress has been made in bacteriological warfare and we have ordered a half million bombs from America for use should this mode of warfare be employed against us..."<sup>4</sup>

As I later managed to confirm, Mr Harris was familiar with both these minutes. But the inclusion of such remarks would hardly have been helpful to what was to follow.

Since this is an article about bowdlerisation and selective misquotation, the following paragraphs are reproduced in full from pp. 5–6 of the BBC transcript:

**H**ARRIS: In 1944 the secret weapon which Hitler had warned the Allies about at Danzig finally appeared. It was not a germ weapon. It was the flying bomb. Soon it was causing such damage in London that the British began to consider using anthrax as a reprisal against German cities. We have discovered a previously unpublished memorandum written by the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, to the Chiefs of Staff. From the very beginning he had taken a close interest in the development of poison gas and germ weapons. Now, he argued, was perhaps the moment to use them:

[CHURCHILL:] 'If the bombardment of London really became a serious nuisance [...], I should be prepared to do *anything* that would hit the enemy in a murderous place. [...] I do not see why we should always have all the disadvantages of being the gentleman while they have all the advantages of being the cad. [...] It may be several weeks, or even months, before I shall ask you to drench Ger-

<sup>3</sup> P.M.'s Personal Min. No. M.246/4, Churchill to Brown, 8 March 1944, in PREM 3/65.

<sup>4</sup> P.M.'s Personal Min. No. D.162/4, Churchill to Ismay, 21 May 1944, in CAB 120/782.

many with poison gas and, if we do it, let us do it one hundred percent. In the meantime I want the matter studied in cold blood by sensible people and not by that particular set of psalm-singing, uniformed defeatists which one runs across now, here and there. Pray address yourself to this.'

HARRIS [holding open file of documents]: This was the report that Churchill's military advisers produced. It's a chilling assessment of what using chemical and biological weapons would have meant in the Second World War. They advised against using poison gas on the grounds that the bombs we were dropping on German cities were already doing enough damage, but they put biological weapons in a different category.

[QUOTE FROM REPORT:] 'Biological warfare would cause heavy casualties, panic and confusion in the areas affected. It might lead to a breakdown in administration with a consequent decisive influence on the outcome of the war.'

HARRIS: Everything had been worked out to the last detail. [FRONT COVER OF DOCUMENT SHOWN] This top secret report shows how scientists reduced the mass destructive power of anthrax into a neat mathematical formula. The Allies code-named the anthrax weapon *N*. Each bomb weighed four pounds. They were loaded into large aircraft cluster bombs 106 at a time. *N* was not designed for use on the battlefield but specifically for strategic bombing against enemy cities. A few hundred feet above the target the large mother bomb would burst open and scatter the anthrax bomblets over a wide area.

Six German cities were provisionally selected as targets: Aachen, Wilhelmshaven, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Hamburg and Berlin. They were all to be attacked in a single day by a force of 2,700 heavy bombers carrying over 40,000 cluster bombs. Twelve cluster bombs to the square mile; 1,273 anthrax bomblets in that square mile. An almost total saturation of bacteria.

The cities would have become a wasteland. According to the scientists' report 50% of the inhabitants might be killed by inhalation, many more might die through contamination of the skin. This would have meant a death toll of around three million people.

[QUOTE FROM REPORT:] 'The terrain will be contaminated for years, and danger from skin infection should be great enough to enforce evacuation. [...]

There is no satisfactory method of decontamination. There is no preventive inoculation [. . .].'

[HARRIS:] What stopped Churchill using anthrax against Germany was not moral scruples but time. His military advisers told him that the American factories were not yet producing *N* bombs in sufficient quantities to enable a full scale attack to be launched.

[QUOTE FROM REPORT:] '[. . .] There is no likelihood of a sustained attack being possible much before the middle of 1945.'

[HARRIS:] Germany was saved from biological attack by her own defeat.

All this took place little more than two years after Dr Fildes and his team first rode out to Gruinard with their prototype anthrax bomb. If a handful of bombs could make this island uninhabitable for forty years, what might have happened if the Allies had gone ahead with their plans to drop four and a quarter million bombs on Germany?"

WITH THE OBVIOUS ANSWER secured from the Director of Porton that cities like Berlin would still be contaminated had anthrax been used against the Germans, and after adding that "there does now seem to be little doubt that at one time it was contemplated", Mr Harris concluded that biological warfare "is arguably the last great Allied secret of the war." A closing studio reference to "Robert Harris's disturbing report" rounded off *Newsnight's* contribution to British military historiography. The newspaper headlines followed.

### *The Planning Machinery*

ALTHOUGH it had little to do with Churchill *per se*, the academic research I was completing when the story broke included a long section on the British biological warfare programme and was based on some three years' study of the documents of Churchill's (and Clement Attlee's) military advisers. These were the Chiefs of Staff, and some grasp of the nature of their organisation is essential for an understanding of what really happened in 1944.

The CoS Committee was made up of the heads of the three Services, the Chief of Combined

Operations (when such matters were under consideration), and the Chief Staff Officer to the Minister of Defence—General Ismay. Ismay was Churchill's channel of communication with his military advisers who sat at the head of a pyramid of inter-Service sub-committees and staffs. There was also a Vice-Chiefs of Staff Committee, set up in 1940 to lighten the decision-making burden of the main body. Of the specialist sub-committees, only the Joint Planning Staff was charged with the preparation of strategic plans for the consideration of the Service Chiefs or Vice-Chiefs. The Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee collated information on which plans might be based. The Joint Technical Warfare Committee coordinated the technical study of operational projects and problems. The Inter-Service Committee on Chemical Warfare and the Inter-Service Sub-Committee on Biological Warfare respectively supervised all developments appertaining to poison gas and germs. But the JTWC, the ISCCW, and the ISSBW had *no strategic planning role* at all. They were purely technical and/or administrative bodies, and the papers they produced were designed to show the strategic planners what was technically feasible and what simply could not be done. Their adoption of a particular strategic hypothesis in the course of a given feasibility study in no way implied that the implementation of that hypothesis had ever been considered as a matter of policy by the responsible military authorities.

Nor did the strategic views of the Joint Planning Staff itself count for anything in advance of endorsement by the parent CoS Committee. As Brigadier A. T. Cornwall-Jones, a former secretary to the CoS organisation, had warned me in a letter of 18 May 1976 (near the start of my research):

"... it needs to be understood that the views of these bodies were never authoritative. They were groups of men who operated under the Chiefs of Staff but it was the Chiefs of Staff whose views mattered, it being accepted that the signature of the Vice-Chiefs was just as good as the Chiefs' on any but the terribly big issues. . . . Very often the planners' views would be accepted. Just as often perhaps they would be changed and sometimes 'chucked out'."

In the summer of 1981, for example, it was a failure to clarify the precise status and purposes of certain Joint Technical Warfare Committee papers drawn up soon after the War which led to a press report headed "GERM ATTACK IN 1946 CONSIDERED" and to a mischievous Parliamentary Question in

the House of Lords from Fenner Brockway.<sup>5</sup> In fact, these "plans for an attack on Russian cities by Britain using atomic bombs and germ warfare weapons" were nothing more than hypothetical studies compiled to help the JTWC assess the likely future nature of warfare. They were not even "contingency plans" against the Russians. Not only had Britain no atomic weapons in 1946, but—as will be seen—she had no effective biological weapons either.

### *Gas, Not Germs: The Misquoted Minute*

SHORTLY AFTER the programme was screened, I got in touch with Professor R. V. Jones of Aberdeen University. As Churchill's Assistant Director of Intelligence (Science) at the Air Ministry during the War, he had been a key figure in the fight against Hitler's flying bombs and rockets. He confirmed what my reading of such CoS documents on the subject as I had already seen suggested: that the Prime Minister had advocated the use of gas, not germs, in response to the V-weapon threat. Indeed, he had mentioned this incident himself in a biographical memoir of Churchill published by the Royal Society in 1966, and in connection with a television series which gave rise to a BBC publication in 1978. His own book on British scientific intelligence in the Second World War had stressed how greatly the "experts" had erred in overestimating the size of the V.2 rocket (not the V.1 flying bomb referred to by Harris on the BBC), with each being thought capable by some of inflicting up to 4,000 casualties (according to the Ministry of Home Security in 1943), and with the size of the warhead still being thought—at the time of the Churchill initiative of July 1944 dramatised by *Newsnight*—to be between three and seven times as great as it really

was.<sup>6</sup> In any case, as Professor Jones wrote on 5 May to George Carey, the programme's editor:

"There was no mention, so far as I know, of biological, as opposed to chemical, warfare in what Churchill had said, and I think that the anthrax story is really quite distinct."

In this belief he was absolutely correct; but the BBC *Newsnight* team remained resolutely unimpressed.

The charges levelled against the BBC during the press controversy that followed the broadcast concentrated on its misrepresentation of comments about the use of poison gas (a crude, and rather ineffective weapon) as relating also to germ warfare, and its interleaving and distortion of CoS material in such a way as to confuse hypothetical contingency planning with serious consideration of germ warfare as a policy for implementation.<sup>7</sup> These charges were perfectly well-founded. Yet there was an even more basic flaw in the *Newsnight* case which only systematic research could uncover: (1) that Churchill never asked for the use of anthrax to be considered in any way whatever, and (2) that the document in which it was claimed that he did never even existed.

LET ME EXAMINE first the Prime Minister's outspoken 6 July 1944 minute<sup>8</sup>—*Newsnight's* prized discovery purportedly showing that "the British" began to consider using anthrax in response to "the flying bomb", and in which Churchill was originally claimed to have "argued" that the moment to use "gas and germs" had perhaps arrived. It was addressed to General Ismay for the Chiefs of Staff Committee, and its serial number was D.217/4. This number is important. We shall be meeting it again, so it is as well to understand that every such minute had its own serial number, the last figure of which was simply the last figure of the year in which it was written—in this case, 1944. The subject of the minute was spelt out in its opening paragraph. It was not anthrax.

"1. I want you to think very seriously over this question of poison gas. I would not use it unless it could be shown either that (a) it was life or death for us, or (b) that it would shorten the war by a year.

2. It is absurd to consider morality on this topic when everybody used it in the last war without a word of complaint from the moralists

<sup>5</sup> *The Times*, 15 June 1981; Lord Brockway, House of Lords Debate, *Hansard* (Vol. 422, No. 107, Col. 188), 30 June 1981.

<sup>6</sup> R. V. Jones, "Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill", in *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society* (1966), Vol. XII, pp. 82–3. Brian Johnson, *The Secret War* (BBC, 1978; Arrow, 1979), p. 199. R. V. Jones, *Most Secret War* (Hamish Hamilton, 1978; Coronet, 1979), pp. 437, 547–8, 562–8.

<sup>7</sup> *The Guardian*, 7, 9, 13, 20, 30 May 1981, 2 June 1981; *The Times*, 11, 20 May 1981; *Daily Telegraph*, 18, 21, 25, 29 May 1981, 2, 11 June 1981; *The Listener*, 4, 25 June 1981, 2 July 1981, 17 August 1981.

<sup>8</sup> P.M.'s Personal Min. No. D.217/4, 6 July 1944, in PREM 3/89 (also in CAB 120/775).

or the Church. On the other hand, in the last war the bombing of open cities was regarded as forbidden. Now everybody does it as a matter of course. It is simply a question of fashion changing as she does between long and short skirts for women.

3. I want a cold-blooded calculation made as to how it would pay us to use poison gas, by which I mean principally mustard. We will want to gain more ground in Normandy so as not to be cooped up in a small area. We could probably deliver 20 tons to their 1 and for the sake of the 1 they would bring their bomber aircraft into the area against our superiority, thus paying a heavy toll.

4. Why have the Germans not used it? Not certainly out of moral scruples or affection for us. They have not used it because it does not pay them. The greatest temptation ever offered to them was the beaches of Normandy. This they could have drenched with gas greatly to the hindrance of our troops. That they thought about it is certain and that they prepared against our use of gas is also certain. But the only reason they have not used it against us is that they fear the retaliation. What is to their detriment is to our advantage.

5. Although one sees how unpleasant it is to receive poison gas attacks, from which nearly everyone recovers, it is useless to protest that an equal amount of H.E. [high explosive] will not inflict greater cruelties and sufferings on troops or civilians. One really must not be bound within silly conventions of the mind whether they be those that ruled in the last war or those in reverse which rule in this.

6. If the bombardment of London really became a serious nuisance and great rockets with far-reaching and devastating effect fell on many centres of Government and labour, I should be prepared to do *anything* that would hit the enemy in a murderous place. I may certainly have to ask you to support me in using poison gas. We could drench the cities of the Ruhr and many other cities in Germany in such a way that most of the population would be requiring constant medical attention. We could stop all work at the flying bomb starting points. I do not see why we should always have all the disadvantages of being the gentleman while they have all the advantages of being the cad. There are times when this may be so but not now.

<sup>9</sup> Cunningham Papers, Vol. XXI, *Diary*, 1944 (British Library, Add. MS. 52577).

7. I quite agree it may be several weeks or even months before I shall ask you to drench Germany with poison gas, and if we do it, let us do it one hundred per cent. In the meanwhile, I want the matter studied in cold blood by sensible people and not by that particular set of psalm-singing uniformed defeatists which one runs across now here now there. Pray address yourself to this. It is a big thing and can only be discarded for a big reason. I shall of course have to square Uncle Joe [Stalin] and the President; but you need not bring this into your calculations at the present time. Just try to find out what it is like on its merits.

W.S.C.”

A COMPARISON of this minute with the first two of the *Newsnight* paragraphs quoted on pp. 19-20 shows how seriously it was mistreated. If its opening passage had to be suppressed, it should at least have been accurately paraphrased. Nothing could justify the assertion that Churchill was recommending the use of biological as well as chemical warfare. As Peter Hennessy (whose accurate summaries of the relevant documents were written for *The Times* without the benefit of a viewing of the *Newsnight* report) told me on 18 August:

“It appeared to me from the moment I read the documents that the two things—mustard and anthrax—were entirely separate; and I didn’t actually make a great point of saying to myself ‘Ah, these are separate and we must be careful’, because it was obvious to me that they were.”

Nor were the Chiefs of Staff in any doubt about what Churchill was discussing. Two of them kept unofficial diaries on a daily basis during their period of office, and those of the Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham, are now available in the British Library archives. This is what Cunningham wrote on Saturday, 8 July 1944:

“C.O.S. meeting at 1100. Discussion on P.M.’s rather immoderate minutes (a) on the use of gas (b) on General Alexander’s plans in Italy. In the first he talks of ‘uniformed psalm-singers’ presumably referring to the Directors of Plans [on the Joint Planning Staff]. . . . He obviously had a bad day after his statement [of 6 July, on flying bombs] in H[ouse] of C[ommons].”<sup>9</sup>

It was certainly true that the Joint Planning Staff had very recently deprecated using gas, which was

felt unlikely to stop the V-weapon campaign and more likely to prove a net disadvantage to advancing Allied troops.<sup>10</sup> Churchill's 6 July outburst had been largely in response to this JPS report, but the Chiefs of Staff agreed with the views of their own strategic planners. As Cunningham noted, the question was considered just two days later. The Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, launched the main attack on what the official record described as "a minute (Serial No. D.217/4) from the Prime Minister directing that a comprehensive examination be made of *the question of employing gas* against Germany" (italics added). In his view, gas would not produce the effects Churchill anticipated. It would be very difficult to achieve a heavy concentration of gas over a wide area, and Portal simply did not believe that concentrated attacks on flying-bomb sites would prove effective either. The JPS planners had already made one attempt on the problem, and in the ensuing discussion it was suggested that the task should be undertaken under the supervision of the Vice-Chiefs of Staff this time, and that both the Chemical and Biological Warfare sub-committees should also be consulted. In other words, the Chiefs of Staff took it upon themselves to widen the terms of reference for the proposed report to bring in germ warfare as well as gas. This broadening of the task was specified in the formal instruction to the Vice-Chiefs to "carry out a comprehensive examination of the points raised in the Prime Minister's minute, and to include in their examination consideration of the possibilities of biological warfare and of the form which enemy reprisals might take."<sup>11</sup> As Churchill had not asked for biological warfare also to be covered, the CoS secretary who reported back to him immediately after the meeting did not even bother to mention that it had also been decided to take a look at germs as well as gas in the feasibility study:

"Prime Minister, Reference your minute at Flag 'A' (D.217/4) about the use of gas, the Chiefs of Staff this morning directed the Vice-Chiefs of Staff to go into this matter with the greatest care and thoroughness, bringing into consultation all interested authorities.

2. A report will be submitted to you as soon as possible."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> JP(44)177(Final), 5 July 1944, in CAB 84/64.

<sup>11</sup> CoS(44)227th Mtg (0)(14), 8 July 1944, in CAB 79/77.

<sup>12</sup> CoS Sec. Min. 1140/4, Hollis to Churchill, 8 July 1944, in CAB 120/775.

## The Non-Existent Paper

ON 4 JUNE 1981, an article appeared in *The Listener*, in which Robert Harris significantly modified what had been broadcast by *Newsnight*. *The Listener* is a weekly BBC journal normally publishing items based on broadcasts within days of their transmission. When I suggested that a month's hiatus—as in this case—was rather unusual, one of the *Listener* editorial staff agreed. It seemed to me that efforts were being made to rectify in print what had been irresponsibly put out over the air but subsequently challenged by Professor R. V. Jones, Winston Churchill, MP, and myself.

In particular, the 6 July minute was no longer claimed to be about anthrax. The crucial opening paragraph was belatedly restored; and the expostulation about being prepared to do "anything" was described merely as a "hint" by Churchill that "he might go even further than using poison gas." The phrase about "great rockets with far-reaching and devastating effect" falling on London was still cut out, however; and the point that the massive overestimation of their potential had been rectified by mid-August—before the V.2 attack had even begun—was never made at all.

What Robert Harris really now relied upon ("Churchill and the Germ Bomb", *The Listener*, 4 June 1981) was his belief that

"a week later, in an individual minute circulated to each of the Vice-Chiefs of Staff, Churchill significantly extended the terms of reference of the report he wanted on poison gas: now he called for an evaluation of the implications of using gas 'or any other method of warfare [Harris's italics] which we have hitherto refrained from using against the Germans.' This was a carefully veiled but unmistakable reference to anthrax."

Carefully veiled? Unmistakable? If indeed it was a reference to anthrax, it had certainly not been made by the Prime Minister. . . .

As the controversy progressed, I had been becoming increasingly dubious about this so-called 13 July minute by Churchill. It was true that I had seen a CoS document indicating that the Prime Minister had asked for other methods in addition to gas also to be considered. I had mentioned this in my first critique of the *Newsnight* report, published in *The Guardian* on 7 May. And I had presumed that Mr Harris must have seen some such further minute from Churchill (as his replies in the press implied) since he seemed able to assign a precise date to it. In this I was very much mistaken. All my

subsequent efforts to track down this document proved fruitless. It was certainly not to be found in the Prime Minister's file cited by Robert Harris in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* published on 21 May 1981. Eventually, on 25 June, I wrote to Professor Jones, who had referred to it in one of his own criticisms of the *Newsnight* presentation. In his reply (29 June), he drew my attention to page 726 of Anthony Cave Brown's *Bodyguard of Lies*.

This book had aired some contentious hypotheses when it appeared in 1976. One of its most notorious charges had been that in November 1940 Churchill deliberately failed to take the maximum possible level of measures to protect the city of Coventry from impending aerial attack—a decision which was praised as essential for the security of the “Ultra” code-breaking technique. But in fact it was a melodramatic myth. The Official History of Wartime Intelligence later showed that the identity of the target city simply had not been known in time for extra preparations to be made.

AS IT TURNED OUT, Anthony Cave Brown's propensity for documentary imprecision had reasserted itself in his coverage of biological warfare, and Mr Harris had drawn on Cave Brown without checking the “sources” for himself. For there was no “13 July minute.” Churchill had never expanded his request for a report on gas to include anthrax at all. After his initial approach, he did not again raise the subject with the CoS organisation until 25 July 1944,<sup>13</sup> when he rather testily reminded Ismay that:

“On July 6 I asked for a dispassionate report on the military aspects of threatening to use lethal and corrosive gases on the enemy if they did not stop the use of indiscriminate weapons.

I now request this report within three days.

W.S.C.”

This minute referred neither to anthrax nor as a matter of fact to any intervening instruction to widen the scope of the report. And a copy of it was included in the principal file cited by Robert Harris in his *Daily Telegraph* correspondence.

What had happened between 6 and 25 July? It is not hard to find this out from a close reading of the Chiefs of Staff papers. Unlike those of the Prime Minister's Office (on which *Newsnight* had mainly

<sup>13</sup> P.M.'s Personal Min. No. D.234/4, Churchill to Ismay, 25 July 1944, in PREM 3/89 (also in CAB 120/775).

<sup>14</sup> CoS(44)234th Mtg (0) (1) (Confidential Annex), 13 July 1944, in CAB 79/89.

relied), CoS documents nearly always cited the serial numbers of minutes to which cross-reference might be made. The record of the meeting of the Vice-Chiefs of Staff, held on 13 July with a view to discharging the task laid upon them by their Chiefs five days earlier, was no exception in this respect.

Certainly the Vice-Chiefs considered the contents of a minute by Churchill—but, as the serial number cited in the record of the meeting shows, it was the very same minute he had written on 6 July—which Mr Harris's *Listener* article belatedly conceded to have been a minute about poison gas. What the Vice-Chiefs had before them was

“a minute (COS.1150/4) by the Secretary, circulated personally to each Vice-Chief of Staff, referring to a minute (Serial No. D.217/4) by the Prime Minister directing that a comprehensive examination be made of the question of employing gas against Germany.”

It was agreed that the examination would have to be carried out by the Joint Planning Staff as the (technical) Inter-Service Committee on Chemical Warfare “was not a suitable body to carry out an investigation of this nature.” Clear terms of reference would have to be given to the JPS and these should exclude ethical and political factors. The only specific reference to germ warfare came right at the end of the VCoS discussion, and even that was of a rather indirect nature:

“With reference to the decision that the investigation should cover all forms of chemical and biological warfare [*i.e.* the decision of the Chiefs of Staff on 8 July], it was suggested that the Germans might react to the initiation of gas warfare by the employment of bacteriological warfare. The investigation should, therefore, include consideration of German readiness to undertake bacteriological warfare.”

The CoS secretariat was set to work to draft appropriate terms of reference for the Joint Planning Staff, which would receive technical advice from the other (non-strategic) sub-committees of the Chiefs of Staff.<sup>14</sup>

On 16 July 1944, Colonel Denis Capel-Dunn, head of the Joint Staffs secretariat, drew up the document which ultimately misled Robert Harris, Anthony Cave Brown, an earlier historian—Roger Parkinson, on whose book, *A Day's March Nearer Home* (1974), both drew heavily—and also myself, until I went into the matter a little more systematically. For in issuing these terms of reference to the JPS, Colonel Capel-Dunn failed to differentiate between what the Prime Minister had

asked for on 6 July and the decision of the Chiefs of Staff, on considering Churchill's minute two days later, that biological warfare should also be looked into. It was irrelevant to the task in hand to make such a distinction, so Colonel Capel-Dunn conflated the two strands in the following way:<sup>15</sup>

"The Prime Minister has directed that a comprehensive examination should be undertaken of the military implications of our deciding on an all-out use of gas, principally mustard gas, or any other method of warfare which we have hitherto refrained from using against the Germans in the following circumstances:—

(a) As a counter-offensive in the event of the use by the enemy of flying bombs and/or giant rockets developing into a serious threat to our ability to prosecute the war;

or, alternatively,

(b) as a means of shortening the war or of bringing to an end a situation in which there was a danger of a stalemate."

That was the passage which had suggested to me that a further Churchill minute must have been written between 6 and 16 July. It had been more seriously misread by Harris, Cave Brown and Parkinson, who took it to be the text of another Churchill minute and presumed it to be what the Vice-Chiefs had seen at their 13 July meeting. But, as we now know, it was merely a gloss on what Churchill had written about gas (6 July), what the Chiefs of Staff had added about germs without telling him (8 July), and what the Vice-Chiefs had decided about how to tackle the job (13 July). The CoS and VCoS contributions were implied more strongly in the second paragraph of Capel-Dunn's directive to the Joint Planning Staff:

"2. The Chiefs of Staff have instructed the Joint Planning Staff [another gloss—the CoS actually instructed the VCoS, who in turn instructed the JPS] to carry out this examination, which should cover the possibilities of the use of biological warfare by us or by the enemy. It should take the form of a thorough and practical examination of the military factors involved and should ignore ethical and political considerations. . . ."

<sup>15</sup> JP(44)190 (0) (T.R.), 16 July 1944, in CAB 84/64.

<sup>16</sup> Sec: PREM 3/89; CAB 80/85; CAB 84/64; CAB 120/775.

<sup>17</sup> COS(44)248th Mtg (0) (6), 26 July 1944, in CAB 79/78.

<sup>18</sup> CoS(44)661 (0), 26 July 1944, in CAB 80/85.

I do not doubt that Robert Harris genuinely, though erroneously, believed that the Prime Minister had followed up his 6 July minute about gas with a further one asking for any other unused methods of warfare also to be considered. Yet, had he troubled to look behind his secondary sources (Cave Brown and Parkinson) both of which dealt with this topic only as a side issue, he would have found—as I did—that Churchill never expanded his request for a report about gas in any way whatsoever. With that, any vestige of an excuse for quoting the 6 July minute as if its comments about gas also applied to anthrax would have finally disappeared.

### *The "Chilling" Assessment & the Interleaved Report*

MORE BLAMEWORTHY by far than the mistreatment of the 6 July minute, however, was *Newsnight's* presentation of the report that the Joint Planning Staff eventually produced in response to it. At least four separate copies of this paper were openly declassified at the Public Record Office in 1972 when most of the Wartime material was released,<sup>16</sup> so it can hardly be described as having accidentally slipped out.

The record of the Chiefs of Staff meeting of 26 July 1944 notes that they considered Churchill's 25 July minute as the sixth item on their agenda that day. As the CoS secretary put it, this requested that the Prime Minister "should be provided, within three days, with the report on the military aspects of the initiation of gas warfare for which he had asked (*D.217/4*) on July 6th."<sup>17</sup> The report was completed late that night. It was overwhelmingly concerned with poison gas (eight-and-a-half pages). Not only was anthrax covered in much less detail (one-and-a-half pages), but there was also no conceptual comparison between the two. Whereas gas warfare was distinctly possible and was argued against at length, germ warfare was simply out of the question. And, as the short section on anthrax showed, an anthrax attack was a non-starter because Britain simply did not have the bombs which would be needed. So it was pointless to go into the question of what targets to attack or what even the military effects of long-term contamination would be. Neither was considered. Both sections of the report were prefaced by a summary of the whole. It had this to say about biological warfare:<sup>18</sup>

"19. [*Paras. 2–18 were all about gas*] If the claims of *N* [anthrax] are substantiated, its use

could probably make a material change in the war situation, but there is no likelihood of a sustained attack being possible before the middle of 1945.

20. There is no known prophylactic against *N.* If it can be used in practice, the effect on morale will be profound.

21. It is improbable that the Germans will initiate biological warfare. There is no evidence to show whether they are in a position to retaliate in kind, were we to initiate it."

ROBERT HARRIS'S VERSION in a letter to *The Listener* given pride of place on 2 July 1981 was rather different:

"The one and a half pages on anthrax were sufficiently detailed to show that an anthrax attack was feasible [he wrote], given the bombs."

In the words of Norris McWhirter (who replied on 17 August), this was "like claiming that a man can be described as a millionaire 'given enough wealth' while omitting to mention that he is, in fact, an undischarged bankrupt! . . ." Mr Harris's problem was that, if anthrax really was out of the question, any rejection by Churchill of the report's conclusions could only apply to gas. This was something I had always maintained to be obvious—even without knowing that Churchill's interest in "any other method of warfare" was just a secretary's gloss.

The fact of the matter was that, while the Joint Planning Staff report claimed chemical (*i.e.* gas) warfare to be feasible but undesirable, it showed effective biological warfare not to be feasible at all.

The Chiefs of Staff discussed the report at their 28 July 1944 meeting. The records show their deliberations to have been limited to the case against using gas.<sup>19</sup> In view of his impatience to obtain a response to his 6 July minute, Churchill had been given a copy the night before. Ismay now wrote to tell him of the amendments made, and the endorsement given to it by the Service Chiefs. His letter to the Prime Minister again referred only to the chemical warfare aspect. Churchill's last words on the subject were in reply to that communication from Ismay:<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> CoS(44)251st Mtg (0) (7), 28 July 1944, in CAB 79/78.

<sup>20</sup> Ismay to Churchill, 28 July 1944 & P.M.'s Personal Min. No. D.238/4, Churchill to Ismay, 29 July 1944, both in PREM 3/89 (also in CAB 120/775).

<sup>21</sup> CoS(44)253rd Mtg (0) (3), 31 July 1944, in PREM 3/89.

<sup>22</sup> Cunningham Papers. Vol. XXI, *Diary*, 1944 (British Library, Add. MS. 52577).

"I am not at all convinced by this negative report. But clearly I cannot make head against the parsons and the warriors at the same time.

The matter should be kept under review and brought up again when things get worse.

W.S.C."

Given the sheer impossibility of a germ attack (not to mention the fact that he had only asked about gas anyway, as we now know), it was clearly nonsensical to claim that these remarks applied to anthrax. At an early stage in the controversy, Robert Harris said that he knew of "no evidence whatever" for my assertion that this 29 July minute was a minute about gas. Though I failed to see the need for "evidence" of what was fairly obvious, I was able to point out that on 31 July the Chiefs of Staff had taken note of Churchill's remarks as comments on their report on initiating "chemical" warfare, and that the relevant record was actually included in a file used for the programme.<sup>21</sup> This drew the response (*Daily Telegraph*, 2 June 1981) that I had alighted on "merely a routine acknowledgement" and loaded it "with enormous significance" to suit my own case. Considering the weight placed on the vaguest phrases by Mr Harris himself, I referred to Admiral Cunningham's diary<sup>22</sup> which was not subject to the considerations of brevity or security suggested by Mr Harris as grounds for CoS coyness in official minutes. This is what it said:

"Monday, July 31st, 1944.

C.O.S. meeting at 1100. Nothing much of importance, P.M.'s minute on the study of retaliation by gas was to the effect that he could do nothing if the warriors as well as the parsons were against him."

And what, now, about the BBC's description of the JPS report as "a chilling assessment of what using chemical *and biological* weapons would have meant in the Second World War"; what now of all those delightful predictions of three million deaths, specific target cities, and near-permanent contamination, culminating in a reversion to the JPS conclusion that insufficient bombs would be available for a sustained attack as the reason that this never came to pass? Curiously enough, Anthony Cave Brown had also described the report as "a chilling assessment"—of the advantages and disadvantages of poison gas.

Any assessment of the use of anthrax in warfare—however cursory—can by definition be regarded as chilling. But the fact remains that most of the horrifying details quoted in *Newsnight* were

simply not in the report which Churchill was given. They came from a completely different document prepared (by the Inter-Service Sub-Committee on Biological Warfare for the Joint Technical Warfare Committee) in November 1945, long after the War was over, and even longer after Churchill had left office. *That* was the "scientists' report" in which "Everything had been worked out to the last detail." It had nothing at all to do with the July 1944 V-weapon crisis. Indeed, the notion of having enough anthrax bombs to attack six German cities, should retaliation against German biological aggression prove to be necessary, had been worked out long before that crisis. The 500,000 bombs ordered from the Americans in March 1944 had been thought sufficient for this, should retaliation against German biological aggression prove to be necessary. However, in October 1944, the Biological Warfare sub-committee told the Chiefs of Staff<sup>23</sup> that

"it may be necessary to arrange provision of 8 times this number of bombs in order to achieve results on the scale originally intended."

The empty bomb cases were being manufactured satisfactorily, but preparation of their contents was fraught with difficulties which had not been overcome even by the end of the War. The hypothetical figure of bombs required to "saturate" six cities thus went up—in theory—from 500,000 to the 4½ million cited in the 1945 "scientists' report" used by *Newsnight* to step up the horror of the very limited coverage of anthrax in the 1944 report which Churchill received.

**T**HE ALLIES never had a plan to drop this quantity of bombs on Germany as the BBC claimed. Nor did Britain. Nor did the Chiefs of Staff, who decided on 13 October 1944 to let what was termed "the present token order for 500,000 bombs" stand.<sup>24</sup> There was never any question of ordering another 3½ million of them. What Robert Harris did was to take an essentially academic study prepared by one technical CoS sub-committee to help another in its post-War calculations of the future potentialities of mass-destruction weapons, and to intertwine its contents with those of the July 1944 Joint Planning Staff feasibility study.

<sup>23</sup> Closed (50 years) Document: BW(44)21, 10 October 1944.

<sup>24</sup> CoS(44)338th Mtg (0) (7), 13 October 1944, in CAB 79/81.

Not a word was said in the TV programme to make it clear that two reports, not one, were being quoted. As the camera zoomed in portentously to focus on the words "TOP SECRET" on the 1945 report—in reality, a very common Chiefs of Staff classification—its date could admittedly be seen for a few seconds. But I doubt if even one viewer in a hundred appreciated its significance. Apart from Peter Hennessy's *Times* reports (written before he had seen the programme), all the newspaper accounts erroneously conflated the two documents—as if Churchill had wanted the six German cities (cited by Dr Fildes, the Porton bacteriologist, merely as "typical") actually to be attacked with anthrax. These accounts were based on a Press Association release by Robert Hutchinson which completely failed to distinguish between the separate CoS papers quoted (exactly as one might expect). Publicly, it was maintained that the BBC had at no stage even implied that Churchill saw the 1945 document, but privately Mr Harris was more forthcoming. As he told me on 6 July 1981:

"What I think is fair comment and attack is the fact that the film could have so misled at least one journalist [Hutchinson]. I accept what you say—that it could have led people to have said: 'Churchill planned the death of three million civilians', and that I think is fair criticism of the programme. . . ."

He also dissociated himself from the introductory comparison with the Nazis. Apparently, he had not seen this before it went out over the air. Even on his interpretation of Churchill's actions he felt, he says, that the Prime Minister had behaved perfectly justifiably under the prevailing circumstances. And so far as the categorical claim that "Germany was saved from biological attack by her own defeat" was concerned, it was good to hear him concede: "I think that, given my time again, I wouldn't have said that. . . ."

**R**EGRETTABLY, the fact remains that it *was* said, and Churchill's reputation was gravely damaged as a result of the programme, notwithstanding the good intentions which possibly underlay it.

The most that can be said of the 1944 events is that on one brief occasion the feasibility of using anthrax was investigated by the Chiefs of Staff organisation, only to be immediately dismissed as impracticable. The first Churchill knew of this

investigation was when he saw it tacked on to the end of a report on gas warfare as an unavailable extra option about which he had never inquired. Nor would it have made any difference even if the War had lasted longer, as Harris, Cave Brown and Parkinson all suggested, for the production difficulties proved far too great to be fully overcome even by November 1945 and a further eight months at least would have been required to produce enough charged bombs to attack "six German cities." By this time a far more effective agent had been discovered in the United States—brucella, seldom fatal, simpler to produce, unlikely to cause contamination for more than a period of days rather than years, and requiring perhaps only a tenth of the weight of bombs necessary to deliver an equivalent attack with anthrax. . . .

<sup>25</sup> Retained Document: Note by Defence Research Policy Committee, 23 March 1949.

As for the British programme of Biological Warfare research, the chairman of the Defence Research Policy Committee noted as late as March 1949: "Although there is no practical weapon of biological warfare yet in sight, it may be fairly said that the possibilities of producing one are at least as high as the possibilities of producing atomic weapons were in 1940. . . ."<sup>25</sup> And that was five years before the atom bomb finally appeared.

War history is too important to be left to television sensationalism, eager to ferret out "secrets" whether they exist or not. More than that, the Wartime record of the Western democracies should not be left undefended against those who, in distorting the historical evidence (the bombing of Coventry, the "murder" of General Sikorski, the anthrax bomb), suggest that there was nothing to choose between Churchill and Hitler, between one side and the other in the Second World War.

## Abandoned Village

After a thousand years this village dies:  
A cough sounds from a last inhabitant  
Through a shuttered door. Below, cliffs  
Of a gorge. In clefts, only a loose-stone path  
Goes down, above rapids, pools and falls. So,  
A last man-life dies.

Rats left long ago. Swallows ceased coming. No  
Swifts scythe screaming in, under stone tiles.  
High nettles cross still-sooted oven mouths.  
Nothing crows, bleats, mews, barks, lows. Only  
Coughing again behind that bolted door, as  
A last man-life dies.

Between crags in shadow and sunlight higher,  
A slow eagle family soars. These eagles  
Catch a lift of air, these eagles have nothing  
At all to fear. By other living life  
Is re-assured, though this last man-life  
Coughs up and dies.

Down here pennywort flattens to lizard  
Walls and water-boatmen skate a black  
Polished pool, from which a trickle slides.  
*So be it.* Coughing comes feebler from behind  
These unplastered, brown, wind-bitten walls, as  
This last man-life dies.

*Geoffrey Grigson*