

Dirty War: Rhodesia and Chemical Biological Warfare, 1975–1980

Glenn Cross (Helion, 2017), 248 pp., list of terms and abbreviations, bibliography, indices, appendices, notes.

Reviewed by Ryan Shaffer

Glenn Cross details the history of Rhodesia's chemical and biological warfare against insurgents from 1975 to 1980. Drawing from interviews with former Rhodesian intelligence officers and the small number of documents about the program that remain, he examines the circumstances that led a government to ignore international norms and use chemical and biological weapons (CBW). He argues that the Rhodesian case demonstrates how a small and internationally isolated nation can develop a small-scale CBW program using widely available industrial materials, without being detected by foreign intelligence agencies. The Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) and British South Africa Police (BSAP) Special Branch resorted to CBW when the conventional military failed, directing its officers and associates to "insert CBW-contaminated food, beverages, medicines, and clothing into guerrilla supplies." (xxviii) The book's appendices list and describe the chemical and biological agents linked to the Rhodesian program and include copies of Rhodesian government documents pertaining to the country's CBW efforts.

Organized topically, the book's preface offers a brief overview of Rhodesia's colonial history and demographics, discussing the ethnic and racial divisions arising from a white minority's control of the government over a disenfranchised and mostly rural black African population. Cross describes the Rhodesian War with emphasis on "the regime's inability to defeat decisively a growing guerrilla insurgency through conventional arms alone." (39) He explains the conflict's evolution in the context of post-war British decolonization and the manner in which the Unilateral Declaration of Independence was designed to maintain white minority rule, as well as the ensuing international sanctions that isolated Rhodesia. By the late 1960s, government opponents shifted strategy, believing the only way to change the country was to forcibly seize control. Meanwhile, the CIO had penetrated the opponents' ranks, gathering intelligence and setting up the Selous Scouts to work against the guerrillas. Despite decisionmaking clashes and rivalries between competing government factions, the Rhodesian Security Forces were

far better trained than their opponents, who avoided direct fighting and led Rhodesians to develop new tactics—which ultimately included the use of CBW on soft targets associated with insurgents, like rural schools and farms.

Turning to the actual CBW program, Cross describes its origins as an effort "to eliminate guerrillas" within Rhodesia, "to contaminate water supplies along guerrilla infiltration routes into Rhodesia," and to disrupt insurgent sanctuaries. (81) He notes that many program details will never be known for several reasons: the lack of contemporaneous records; reluctance to speak on the part of many who were involved; and, from those who were not reluctant, mere fragments of the story. Starting with decisions that led to creating the program, Cross points out that the CBW operation was under a Special Branch unit—itsself overseen by the CIO. Known as "Z Desk" or "Counterterrorist Operations," the small group, which consisted mostly of scientists and university student volunteers, was commanded by Michael "Mac" McGuinness (1932–2011). The actual operations remained small and rudimentary, such as "sun-drying liquid pesticides to a powder and brushing them onto clothing" that was distributed to guerrillas. (103) Experiments were also conducted on detained insurgents. Cross estimates the program killed hundreds, explaining that those involved considered the CBW program "effective" because it eliminated the enemy while also creating havoc, when the enemy placed blame on the villages where they had become infected.

The subsequent sections of the book explore South Africa's alleged assistance with CBW efforts and look at the 1978–80 Rhodesian anthrax outbreak. Regarding the role of South Africa's apartheid government, Cross acknowledges "limited and fragmentary information"—including interviews with McGuinness—to connect Rhodesia to South Africa's CBW program. South Africa's program, better known as Project Coast, involved sending "agents/pathogens" by courier, sharing scientific knowledge, and providing financial aid. (153) Cross analyzes converging evidence that links the two countries' CBW efforts

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through the material support of key figures and via information exchanges among scientists. Cross concludes that Rhodesia benefited from the help, but there is not enough information about whether South Africa used knowledge from Rhodesia in “any meaningful way” and questions about the relationship remain—including uncertainties around the timing and details of these exchanges. (163)

When Cross examines the major Rhodesian anthrax outbreak that started in 1978 and the allegations that it was part of a deliberate campaign by Rhodesian or South African officials, he analyzes available sources and finds the evidence “highly consistent with a naturally occurring epidemic, and its propagation almost certainly . . . due to wartime conditions” and to environmental factors, previous anthrax outbreaks, social conditions, and the “collapse of the veterinary and public health system in rural Rhodesia.” (205) Noting the challenges of bioattribution, Cross explores the nature of anthrax, previous outbreaks in the region, the chronology of the 1978 outbreak, possible transmission paths, and the lack of evidence linking the outbreak to deliberate dissemination.

Lastly, Cross examines the legacy of the Rhodesian CBW program, highlighting how understanding its origins and development can contribute to discovering and addressing small nations and non-state actors that develop chemical and biological weapons. Notably, he explores the incentives for using CBW, including its psychological affects and utility in asymmetric warfare, and how disincentives for deploying CBW can be influenced by a country’s position within the larger international community. For example, Cross writes, “The contextual nature of the international CBW norms weakens the norms’

effectiveness in preventing CBW use—especially in intrastate conflict such as counterinsurgencies, where regime survival is at stake.” (240)

The book is a well-researched study that sheds light on the reasons a government broke international norms to use CBW, a tactic more likely to target local non-state actors than foreign militaries. Cross explains how CBW were deployed—with “remarkable effectiveness”—against insurgents, details the specific chemical and biological agents used, offers estimates of the death toll, and describes a putative chain of command. He writes, “The most enduring and relevant legacy of the Rhodesian CBW effort is that similar small-scale CBW efforts drawing on limited scientific knowhow, primitive equipment and crude materials can be effective for State and non-State actors today.” (240)

Cross provides a sturdy framework for historicizing and analyzing the Rhodesian CBW program, but sometimes the discussion is too narrow; for instance, the reaction of the affected populations and the insurgents’ perspective on the impact of the CBW effort are admittedly missing. Moreover, the wider psychological impact that the rumors—supported or not—had on Rhodesian politics and society is not discussed. Lastly, while the broad political history and group differences are described, the cultural context—including the role of dehumanizing propaganda that targeted government opponents and helped enable the use of chemical and biological weapons—is not explored. Nonetheless, Cross provides a solid history of a relatively small and obscure CBW program, demonstrating its historical significance as well as its relevance to the contemporary world.



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