

TV film on death of Frank Olson

German documentary charges US used biological weapons in Korean War

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The claim by the Bush administration that Baghdad is threatening the world with weapons of mass destruction is the main pretext for its war preparations against Iraq. However, a documentary recently broadcast by the German state television channel, ARD, suggests that the US government is itself hiding biological warfare programs from the rest of the world, and actually employed such weapons in 1952 during the Korean War.

The documentary, entitled *Codename Artichoke—the Secret Human Experiments of the CIA*, was aired by ARD last August. A book with the same title was published shortly afterwards. The authors of both the film and the book, TV journalists Edmond R. Koch and Michael Wech, focus on the case of biochemist Dr. Frank Olson, who died on November 28, 1953 after a mysterious fall from the 13th floor of the Hotel Pennsylvania in New York City.

At the time of his death, Olson had been given the highest clearance for access to classified information. He was one of the leading scientists doing research in the field of biological weapons, and had been working for ten years in the biological warfare facilities at Maryland's Camp Detrick (today, Fort Detrick) near Washington DC.

He also occupied a leading position in "Operation Artichoke," a CIA program that coordinated all projects of the Army, Navy and CIA involving psychedelic drugs, fatal poisons and similar substances. Those involved in this project included German doctors who had experimented with human beings in the Nazi concentration camps.

Artichoke involved the use of torture and drugs to interrogate people. The effects of substances such as LSD, heroin and marijuana were studied, using unsuspecting individuals as human guinea pigs. The CIA was eager to identify military uses for substances that altered the psyche. The agency was at that time obsessed with the idea that the Soviets or the Chinese might employ methods of brainwashing to recruit double agents or manipulate the population of entire nations.

Artichoke also included the development of poisons that take effect immediately. These substances were later used in attempts on the lives of a number of foreign leaders, e.g., Abdul Karim Kassem (Iraq), Patrice Lumumba (Congo), and Fidel Castro (Cuba).

Before Frank Olson plunged to his death from a window of the Hotel Pennsylvania in 1953, he exhibited symptoms of behavioural disturbance. Friends, family members and colleagues shown in the film and quoted in the book assume that he had seen things that he felt went too far, and intended to quit his work with the CIA. Prior to his death he had seen a psychiatrist on several occasions, always in the company of a CIA watchdog. He died one day before he was scheduled to be committed to a psychiatric hospital.

Olson's death was officially described as suicide due to depression. Only in the mid-1970s, when the CIA's secret activities were scrutinised

in the wake of the Watergate scandal, did the government admit to a certain degree of responsibility: Ten days before his death, the CIA had administered LSD to Olson without his knowledge. President Gerald Ford subsequently apologised to the family, and the CIA paid compensation to his widow.

According to the documentary, this was a further cover-up operation. The film presents evidence suggesting that the death of the biochemical expert was not suicide, but murder.

Frank Olson's son, Eric, is convinced that his father was assassinated. He has been trying for decades to clear up the circumstances of his father's death, and has gathered numerous pieces of evidence supporting the thesis of murder, which he made available to the authors of *Codename Artichoke*.

In 1994 Eric Olson had his father's body exhumed and examined by a renowned forensic scientist, who concluded that in all probability someone had knocked Frank Olson unconscious in the hotel room and thrown him out of the window, in contrast to the official version, which claimed Olson had jumped.

After the report on the post-mortem had been published, the public prosecutor's office in Manhattan initiated proceedings against an unknown person. However, the prosecutor lost interest as soon as the CIA intervened into the questioning of the main witness, the CIA agent Robert Lashbrook, who had accompanied Olson continuously prior to his death and had been in the hotel room when Olson fell out of the window.

A memorandum dated July 11, 1975 and printed in the book strongly indicates that the CIA has something to hide. Addressed to the White House chief of staff, the memo urgently recommended an official apology by the president so as to forestall any trial or official hearing on the Olson case. Otherwise, the memo said, "it might be necessary to disclose highly classified national security information." Ten days later President Ford met with the Olson family in the White House.

The addressee and the author of this memo are still active and hold prominent positions in government. The former is Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, who was then White House chief of staff, and the latter is Vice President Dick Cheney, who was then Rumsfeld's deputy.

The following year, after delays in the payment of the promised compensation to the family, another well-known political figure intervened: then-CIA Director George Bush, who himself went on to become US president and whose son is George W. Bush.

In the mid-1970s, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Bush senior collaborated to prevent a thorough investigation into Olson's death, because they feared that it might "disclose highly classified national security information." What information?

The authors of the documentary have traced numerous clues, but given the mass of multifaceted evidence presented, it is often difficult to

distinguish fact from fiction. Olson undoubtedly knew about many things that would have discredited the US administration, and it is entirely plausible that the government sought to silence him.

The authors describe how German physicians who had worked in Nazi concentration camps were rapidly rehabilitated after the war through the US denazification program and put to work on US research projects on biological and chemical warfare. The book also notes that Olson and his colleagues carried out large-scale field experiments with biological weapons. In one case they spread a certain bacillus—which they regarded as harmless—across San Francisco Bay, as a dress rehearsal for a major biological attack on a large city.

Both genuine and alleged enemy agents were subjected to horrifying interrogations, some of which Olson must have witnessed personally, the authors conclude. In some cases these interrogations led to the death of the accused. The most convincing proof of this is a telegram from 1954, in which the CIA director inquires about “bodies available for terminal experiments.”

In addition, thousands of people were used, without their knowledge or consent, for experiments with LSD, mescaline, morphine, seconal, atropine and other drugs. The CIA even ran its own brothels in order to lure its victims. As the inspector general of the US Army later stated in a report to a Senate committee: “[I]n universities, hospitals and research institutions” an “unknown number of chemical tests and experiments ... were carried out with healthy adults, with mentally ill and with prison inmates.”

Most of these activities were exposed in the 1970s, when two commissions appointed by Congress—the Rockefeller and the Church commissions—investigated the secret activities of the CIA. A further investigation was published by John Marks, a former employee of the State Department. After legal proceedings based on the Freedom of Information Act, Marks gained access to several thousand pages of classified CIA material. This material is utilised extensively in the documentary.

In 1969 the US officially cancelled all research programs on biological weapons. Fort Detrick was closed down. Today the site is used by the US Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID), which, according to the official line, strictly limits itself to the analysis of biological weapons for defence purposes. In 1974, the US signed onto the international convention against biological warfare.

There must be reasons for the continuing secrecy surrounding Olson’s death that go beyond the facts which surfaced in the 1970s. One possible reason is linked to Korea—and to last year’s anthrax attacks against leading politicians of the Democratic Party and others that cost the lives of five people.

During the Korean War, both Pyongyang and Beijing repeatedly accused the US of employing bacteriological weapons. These accusations were supported by eyewitness reports, photos, laboratory analyses and the remains of biological bombs.

In 1952, two international commissions which examined the war area with Soviet and Chinese help concluded that the US army had indeed used such weapons. This was confirmed in written statements by US pilots who were held prisoner by Korea. Some of them appeared before the international press and repeated their confessions.

The US categorically denied these accusations, describing the evidence presented as forged, characterising the international commissions as instruments of communist propaganda, and claiming that the soldiers’ confessions were the result of “brainwashing.” Allen W. Dulles, the CIA director, even gave a speech devoted to brainwashing, in which he accused North Korea of “having turned around a whole number of our boys.”

When the prisoners of war who had made these confessions returned from Korea in the summer of 1953, they were interrogated by the

Artichoke team, which had announced its eagerness to do so weeks in advance. In a memorandum to the top leadership of the CIA, the team said it wanted to use those “who have been exposed to and accepted in varying degrees Communist indoctrination ... as unique research material in the Artichoke work.” Among other things, hypnosis, anaesthetics and LSD were to be used on the former POWs. In this way, Artichoke hoped to gain insight into the enemy’s interrogation methods and to make sure that the returned soldiers did not work for the other side.

Koch and Wech, however, believe that Artichoke’s main concern was the confessions of the Air Force pilots. The authors suspect that they contained at least some true revelations.

The authors ask: “Was their will to be broken with LSD? Were they to be subjected to artificial amnesia to make them forget what they saw and did? Biological warfare? Experiments with anthrax and other deadly epidemics?”

Frank Olson probably witnessed some interrogations of soldiers returning from Korea. This is the conclusion drawn by the authors from a careful reconstruction of his travels. As the leading expert on the release of biological weapons, he must have known about the use of such devices if and when they were actually employed. Was this first-hand knowledge the ultimate reason for his demise? Did the CIA silence him when it became clear he was seeking to distance himself from the agency?

This suspicion is given credence by a reliable witness, Norman Cournoyer. In the early years of Camp Detrick, Cournoyer had worked closely with Frank Olson, and remained his best friend until the end. He knew about Olson’s intention to leave the CIA.

In April 2001, Cournoyer, who had read an article about the case in the *New York Times Magazine*, contacted Eric Olson and said he would tell him the truth about his father’s death. “Korea is the key,” he is quoted as saying.

The authors continue: “And then Norman Cournoyer confirmed that the American Air Force had indeed tested biological weapons during the Korean War.” Frank Olson had learned about this and began to despair about what he was doing. In conclusion, Cournoyer said: “Was this the reason for the CIA to kill your father? Probably.”

According to Eric Olson, this statement is in line with remarks of his mother, who used to say: “Your father was always worried about Korea.”

According to Koch and Wech, there is a direct connection between the cover-up of the Olson case and the sluggish investigations into the anthrax attacks of October 2001. Last year’s attempts on the lives of two high-ranking representatives of the American state have not been cleared up to this day. Despite the fact that all evidence points to Fort Detrick and one possible perpetrator is known by name, the investigation has plodded along without any suspects being identified by the government.

A serious probe into either Olson’s death or the recent anthrax attacks, the authors believe, could bring to light things that would severely damage the credibility of the United States. They suspect that the anthrax attacker’s knowledge of certain facts makes it impossible for the FBI to lay hands on him.

The authors suggest that this knowledge relates to secret biological warfare programs. They ask, “Is it conceivable that the US army carried out further research on biological weapons in spite of binding international treaties, even after the official termination of offensive projects involving biological weaponry in 1969?” They then charge that there are “very concrete indications that the Pentagon does not give a damn about international agreements on biological warfare.”

They cite several such indications: the production of a genetically improved version of the anthrax bacterium, which was reported by the *New York Times* on September 11, 2001; the plans by military institutes to develop new microbes that are able to dissolve certain materials; and the consistent refusal of the Bush administration to sign a supplementary protocol to the international convention on biological weapons that would

give teams of United Nations experts access to American military laboratories. In the course of the negotiations in Geneva, according to the authors, it became known that Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld wanted at all costs to prevent any such inspections.

Codename Artichoke—the Secret Human Experiments of the CIA is available in German only from C. Bertelsmann Verlag, Munich.



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