

Does North Korea Have a Biological Weapons Program?



By Alex Berezow, PhD — July 26, 2017



Credit: J.A. de Roo/Wikipedia [1]

When North Korea makes the news, it's usually due to its nuclear missile program. That is certainly a very realistic threat. Just yesterday, U.S. intelligence announced that a [North Korean missile may be able to hit the continental U.S. within a year](#) [2]. The media's coverage, however, tends to overlook some other terrifying aspects of the North Korean regime.

Take its conventional weapons, for instance. North Korea is armed to the teeth. With more than 1.1 million personnel, [North Korea boasts the world's fourth largest military](#) [3]. If war ever broke out on the Korean Peninsula, the [North could fire 500,000 rounds of artillery at Seoul within the first hour](#) [4]. It is not an exaggeration that a war fought entirely with conventional weapons could kill hundreds of thousands or even millions of people.

We know that the North also has a chemical weapons program, made rather obvious by the public assassination of Kim Jong-Un's half-brother, Kim Jong-Nam, likely with [VX nerve agent](#) [5]. The exact size of its chemical weapons stockpile is unknown but thought to be large and diverse, [perhaps 5,000 tons consisting of 25 different agents](#) [6].

North Korea's Biological Weapons Program

North Korea also possesses a biological weapons program. The nature of intelligence is such that details are vague. Intelligence analysis is akin to assembling a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle, with the added twist that most pieces are missing and a few extra pieces that don't actually belong have been tossed into the mix.

With those caveats in mind, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* published a [report](#) [7] last week

about the current state of North Korea's biological weapons program. Its primary findings include:

- North Korea may be researching 13 different types of biological weapons, including the causative agents of smallpox, anthrax, plague, cholera, botulism, and hemorrhagic fever.
- The country may have ten facilities dedicated to biological weapons, seven for research and three for production.
- U.S. intelligence has put out contradictory assessments of North Korea's bioweapons capability, while South Korean intelligence has been consistent in its assessment that the North can produce them.
- Simply possessing the equipment necessary to produce biological weapons does not mean North Korea has successfully done so. It's extremely difficult to produce a useful bioweapon because it requires immense dedication, program continuity, and technical expertise.

The report is very skeptical of North Korea's technical expertise. It further concludes that international sanctions, the nation's impoverished economy, and its hermit-like nature would preclude the existence of a robust biological weapons program. But this may be too rosy of an assessment.

Joby Warrick in the *Washington Post* [reports](#) [8] that, in the 1990s, Russian scientists were arrested prior to boarding a plane to North Korea. The regime had hired unemployed Soviet scientists to build missiles. Today, North Korea's missile program has Soviet fingerprints all over it.

As it turns out, the Soviet Union was also extremely adept at cranking out biological weapons. According to Michael Osterholm and John Schwartz in their book *Living Terrors* [9], the Soviets "maintain[ed] a 4,500-metric-ton supply of anthrax at all times." They had also weaponized smallpox and plague. Just like the unemployed missile scientists, bioweapons scientists were desperate for work. So some of them headed to Iran.

Is it possible, therefore, that the North Korean regime hired former Soviet scientists to build a biological weapons program? Yes. And, if offered such a job, would some of those scientists take it? Absolutely.

Whether or not that actually has occurred is unknown (or, at the very least, not publicly available). But given what we know about Russia and North Korea, the possibility cannot be eliminated.

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[1] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim_Jong-](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim_Jong-un#/media/File:The_statues_of_Kim_Il_Sung_and_Kim_Jong_II_on_Mansu_Hill_in_Pyongyang_(april_2012).jpg)

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[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/us/politics/north-korea-missiles.html?_r=0

[3] <https://www.cfr.org/background/north-koreas-military-capabilities>

[4] <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/25/think-again-north-korea/>

[5] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2017/02/23/vx-nerve-agent-killed-kim-jong-nam-how-does-it-work-10904>

- [6] <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/what-chemical-weapons-north-korea-possesses/articleshow/57340707.cms>
- [7] <http://thebulletin.org/potemkin-or-real-north-korea%E2%80%99s-biological-weapons-program10957>
- [8] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-secret-to-kims-success-some-experts-see-russian-echoes-in-north-koreas-missiles-advances/2017/07/08/5d4f5fca-6364-11e7-a4f7-af34fc1d9d39_story.html
- [9] <https://www.amazon.com/Living-Terrors-America-Bioterrorist-Catastrophe/dp/0385334818>