An Intelligence Windfall

Uncovering a Chemical Weapons Program in the Balkans

Editor's Note: After more than three and a half years of war among ethnically divided and heavily armed adversaries in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a multinational NATO-led force commenced Operation Joint Endeavor in December 1995 to restore order. Occurring against this backdrop, the intelligence discoveries detailed below contributed to NATO's operational planning.

With growing excitement, we learned the details of a program hidden from the world's eyes for nearly four decades.

During a reorganization at the National Ground Intelligence Center (NGIC) in January 1993, I was assigned the task of monitoring the chemical warfare (CW) research programs of the Balkans and other European countries. In my initial weeks, I received an Information Intelligence Report (IIR) from the US Defense Attaché in Zagreb, Croatia, concerning a former Yugoslav Army chemical weapons factory at Bijelo Polje.

At that time, the former Yugoslavia was known to have a strong CW defense program, but the production of offensive chemical agents had not been confirmed.

When a country is suspected of having an offensive chemical weapons program, it is added to a Department of Defense (DoD) "most wanted list" of nations possessing weapons of mass destruction. My 15 years of experience in imagery analysis at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) sent me scrambling for satellite photography of the purported facility. I looked for other leads as well, including open-source reports. Over the years, some intelligence analysts had come to believe that the former Yugoslavia had an offensive as well as defensive CW program, and some suspect sites had been mentioned in reporting, but nothing definitive had resulted.

Identifying the Facility

There are at least five different locations called Bijelo Polje (Serbo-Croatian for "White Plain") in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I was able to narrow the search based on an article published in Zagreb Vjenik magazine on 26 November 1991 that mentioned a weapons plant in the village of Bijelo Polje near Mostar. Using this new information, I found overhead imagery of an odd-looking facility tucked into the mountains seven kilometers north of Mostar.

As a result of my search, on 19 February 1993 DIA formally identified the facility as the "Mostar Possible CW Production Plant" and began targeting it for imagery coverage. We also
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When we arrived in Mostar, the destruction in the city—especially in the Muslim sectors east of the Neretva River—reminded me of scenes from World War II movies.

Passing an abandoned textile plant outside the village of Vrapcici, we turned right onto a narrow, paved, access road to the secret plant. On both sides, high vegetation obscured the surrounding area. A long stretch of fencing topped with barbed wire and connected to concrete posts reminded me of typical security measures at military facilities in the former Warsaw Pact countries. We passed an abandoned sentry shed. No factory sign or logo told us what lay ahead.

Driving into the ghost-like abandoned complex of nearly 30 buildings, we saw a plundered ruin. This had been a top secret complex in the former Yugoslavia, its activities unknown even to nearby villagers. Now the road was strewn with debris from items that local citizens had discarded as they removed anything that could be used in rebuilding their war-battered homes. A ceremonial garden with an empty fountain was overgrown with weeds. Some of the tall evergreens lining the inner connecting roads had been cut down for fuel. The approach of a small red car put our armed escorts on alert, but it was only another driver on his way to cut wood.

We moved through the complex with cameras and tape recorder going. Upon entering the two-story headquarters building, the former

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seen his office since January 1992, when the Serbs told him to take a “vacation” for a few days. Now, cold, damp air blew through the roofless and windowless building. Rain-soaked papers were strewn all over. The keys to the medical building lay on the floor. As the day drew to a close, we gathered classified Yugoslav Army documents from the now-shelverless technical library. On the way back to Split, we dropped the former

Exposing Program Secrets

How could this CW operation have eluded detection for so many years? Thanks to the Zagreb

Anticipating the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Serbs had begun to dismantle their offensive CW program by late 1991. Enough CW agent precursors to make 30 tons of sarin were returned from the Mostar complex to Lucani, Serbia, where they were originally produced. The Serbs also removed a large quantity of final-stage mustard agent.

A floquenze is an Austrian-made 304 soft-ray truck that is used much like a CVHMMWV (Humvee).
precursor, destroyed sarin-filled 122 mm artillery rounds, and took away the most highly classified production-related documents. As fighting closed in during January 1992, there was no time to remove anything more from the Mostar complex than some of the CW reactors and munitions-filling equipment.

The dangers involved in dismantling such a plant in a matter of hours caused the deaths of several soldiers from CW agents.

How did the former Yugoslavia hide its chemical weapons program?

Only after the roofs had been removed by local villagers were the venting pipes detectable.

Hiding the program from local citizens was the task of the facility's security officer. Roving guards with dogs, two rows of chain link fencing, barbed wire, perimeter lighting, and fence sensors protected against intruders. Such measures were not unusual for military-related facilities and would not have provided clues to the plant's activities. Security towers scattered about the plant gave a bird's-eye view of the surrounding area.

In its earliest days, a false association with SOKO, a nearby aircraft plant, disguised the complex—documents with covers labeled SOKO were found at the site. Later, the plant was directly associated with the Military Technical Institute, a CW defense research center. Chemical defense activity did occur at the Mostar facility, but its main purpose, chemical weapons development, remained hidden.

The chemical munitions themselves were carefully disguised.

The casings were referred to as "real smoke" rounds in order to camouflage their true function. Sarin- and mustard-agent-filled munitions were transported, with a military police escort, in nondescript cargo trucks. These munitions had yellow banding, which normally indicated a training round. Over the years, the Mostar facility began to produce the riot-control agent CS for commercial sale. This tear-producing chemical powder was shipped...
in plain brown cardboard canisters, each about the size of a beer keg, to Krusevac, Serbia, where the CS was filled into rifle- and handgrenades and sold worldwide (as noted in Jane's Police and Security Handbook). The chemical’s manufacturing site was never identified. 

The Serbs took additional steps to disguise their CW program.

Beginning in 1985, secret CW field trials were held each September in Križevci Polygon, Macedonia (formerly a Yugoslav province). 

The test site was at the center of a large former Yugoslav training area. The map in the commander’s office did not have a label for activity in the area of the CW tests, but non-CW activity was clearly labeled. Our sources said physical evidence of test activity was removed to keep the site secret. 

One image even showed tests underway, although the nature of the activity could not have been determined from the imagery alone. In June 1995, I assisted in organizing a joint Croatian, Macedonian, and US dig at the site and discovered evidence of chemical weapons tests, including laboratory equipment, hidden bunkers, a blast chamber, and expanded chemical munitions purchased and delivered in 1988, a time when few collection and analytic resources were devoted to Yugoslavia.

Despite the Serbs’ efforts to camouflage their offensive CW program, our sources believed that some Western European countries must have known about it. They spoke of the loose lips of the former Yugoslav Army’s chemical weapons program leader, Bogdan Đorđević, who was known for talking openly at international conferences. Although no foreigners were permitted in the production complex itself, relevant business transactions sometimes occurred as close as downtown Mostar. I asked

Most of the CW-related equipment was

Where Things Stand Now

The Serbs were players in the Conference on Disarmament through the 1980s, which preceded the present Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Serb officials carried out trial inspections during that period, primarily to test procedures. One such inspection took place at what our sources later told us was the country’s first facility for CW agent production—the Prva Iškra complex at Bariša, near Belgrade. The Serbs had listed the site as a phosgene plant, a chemical allowed under the regulations, but one that can also be used as a CW agent. According to an official report, a team composed entirely of Yugoslav officials carried out the inspection. Team members limited
their investigation to one petro-
chemical plant in the complex that
was dedicated to legitimate phos-
gone production, suggesting that
they were knowledgeable about the
cover-up. Belgrade suspended par-
ticipation in the Conference
following the breakup of the coun-
try in 1990.

In July 2000, the Federal Republic
of Yugoslavia (FRY) signed and rat-
ified the CWC and subsequently
declared its CW-related sites. Informa-
tion on the Mostar equipment
was included in the declaration, but
data on its current locations were
imprecise. The National Imagery
and Mapping Agency has identi-
fied equipment at a facility in

Krusevac owned by the Trupal
Company as probably being from
Mostar, consistent with reporting

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