

Teach-in at Edinburgh

from a Participant

A TEACH-IN on chemical and biological warfare, organized by a university group convened by Professor M. R. Pollock, took place in Edinburgh on January 24. Contributors ranged from scientists to members of parliament, and although no American representative could be obtained, a counsellor was present to give the Soviet point of view.

Opening the meeting, Lord Ritchie-Calder deplored the long silence on the subject, especially in view of the danger that its small scale deployment could too easily progress into a full scale chemical and biological war, the implements being available even now.

Mr G. D. Heath, Director of Biological and Chemical Defence, Ministry of Defence, suggested that, although Britain could be attacked with biological weapons, and that little protection is available, the unpredictable results make such an attack of questionable military value. Mr N. E. Gadsby (Director of the Chemical Defence Experimental Establishment, Porton) said, however, that chemical warfare using either lethal or incapacitating agents is of proven defensiveness. This was underlined by Dr S. Rose (Imperial College, London), who discussed the use of chemical and biological weapons by the United States in Vietnam, by the Egyptians in the Yemen and by police to quell some civil disturbances. Major-General R. E. Lloyd (retired), of the Arms Control and Disarmament Research Unit of the Foreign Office, also discounted the use of biological weapons as unpredictable, and in addition suggested that chemical weapons could be effective only when used by a major power against a minor.

Dr D. E. Viney, formerly of the Foreign Office, said that the United States carries large stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons, and although having indicated agreement with the 1925 Geneva Protocol has never ratified this, and in any case justifies the use of non-lethal chemical and biological agents in Vietnam as being outside the terms of the protocol. It is virtually certain that the USSR, which ratified the Geneva Protocol with reservations on reciprocity, also has a stockpile of chemical and biological weapons.

Professor H. Miller (Vice-Chancellor of Newcastle University) condemned the United States for contravening international law, Porton for making chemical and biological warfare palatable ("Well poisoners have never enjoyed public esteem"), and physicians who engage in chemical and biological research which is incompatible with the traditional role and ethics of medicine. Professor D. M. McKinnon (Professor of Divinity, Cambridge University), although believing in the possibility of "just wars", thought the use of chemical and biological weapons morally unjustifiable, and the average man today morally alienated from the policies to which he is committed in ways immune to the control of criticism.

Miller and McKinnon were opposed by Professor R. B. Fisher (Department of Biochemistry, Edinburgh University), an adviser to Porton for fifteen years. He

considered that ethics are of little value today and that the abolition of chemical and biological warfare is impossible, making research into means of protection against it essential.

Mr T. Dalyell (MP for West Lothian) thought that, although chemical and biological warfare is abhorrent to most people, the real danger is in escalation from trivial beginnings to total chemical and biological war, drawing an analogy with the enormous escalation in the use of defoliants which involves a change in the concept of their use by the Americans in Vietnam. Another danger is that chemical and biological warfare is the "poor man's nuclear weapon" which could easily be developed by many smaller countries. As evidence of our good faith, we should publish all information obtained at Porton. Lord Dalkeith (MP for Edinburgh North) took the view that the best defence is an invincible power of retaliation and that, because it is impossible to eliminate wars, nerve gases are necessary, humane and a power for good.

Counsellor V. G. Silatov of the Soviet Embassy, London, pointed out that the Soviet proposals for general disarmament had included chemical and biological warfare, which he condemned as immoral and barbarous. He proposed that the Geneva Protocol was not outdated and that all states should implement it as a step on the way to general disarmament.

Mr J. Morris, MP (Minister of Defence for Equipment), giving the British Government's point of view, described its efforts to eliminate the mystery previously surrounding Porton, which he insisted is essential for national defence. His responsibility was "to balance the interests of the public against the public interest", and therefore ten to twenty per cent of the work done there must remain secret. He stressed that Porton's primary purpose is defensive, so that it should stay part of the Ministry of Defence. Although there are few facilities for protecting the whole civilian population of Great Britain against chemical and biological warfare, he considered it unlikely that it would be used against Britain in the near future.

Dr J. H. Humphrey of the National Institute for Medical Research, London, pointed out that while chemical and biological warfare machinery is maintained, the possibility of its use remains. He remarked that biological warfare at least is recognized to be of little military value, and so all states could outlaw it with little risk. Scientists themselves could report situations contrary to the Government's stated policy, and this might then help to generate the atmosphere of trust which would aid further disarmament.

The teach-in reaffirmed the schism between those who believe that chemical and biological warfare research is necessary for defence and those who feel that it should be abolished as a step towards disarmament, unilaterally if necessary, with defence resting on other means of retaliation. It reflected the particular involvement of the scientist whose work may provide weapons whose use he would denigrate.