

An Intelligence Windfall

Uncovering a Chemical Weapons Program in the Balkans (b)(3)(n)

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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Identifying the Facility (b)(3)(n)

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.

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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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issued reports in April, September, and October 1993 describing what we had learned from the sources and warning NATO of the potential danger. (b)(3)(n)

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.

In-Country Visit (b)(3)(n)

On 4 April, I flew to Zagreb with another CW expert from NGIC. We were driven to the Croatian Ministry of Defense to meet the three scientists. Through our translator and the broken English of the sources, we received an account of the former Yugoslavia's chemical weapons activities. With growing excitement we learned, from those who had actually been involved in developing and running it, the details of a program hidden from the world's eyes for nearly four decades. The scientists not only had done research on CW substances—including the nerve agent sarin, blister agent mustard, psychochemical agent

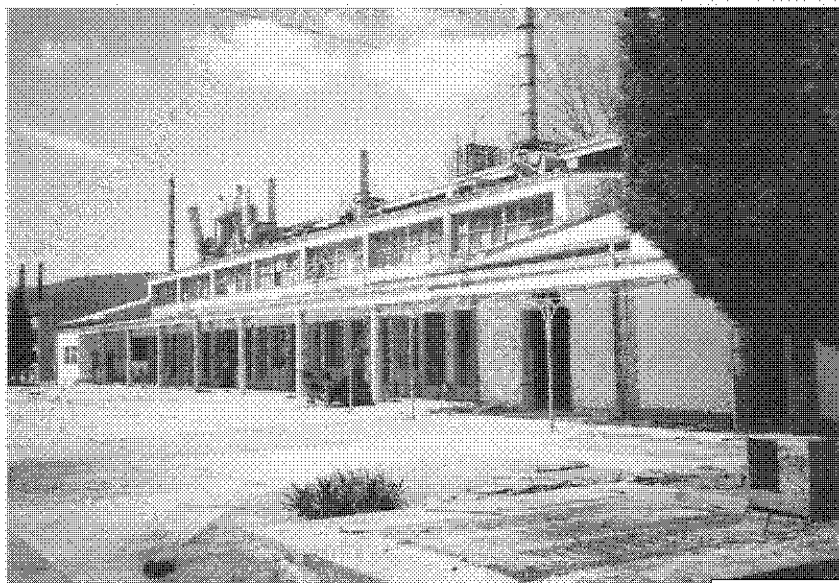
BZ (2-quinuclidinyl benzilate), and riot-control agent CS (ortho-chlorobenzalmalononitrile)—but also had worked on delivery systems. They had assisted in the testing of artillery shells, rifle grenades, hand grenades, rockets, bombs, aerial spray devices, and mines. (b)(3)(n)

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Out of the blue, we were asked if we wanted to visit the plant! There was a pause in the fighting going on around Mostar, so we jumped at the idea. With orders amended, we flew to Split, an ancient city on the Croatian coast. One of our sources—(b)(1)

—accompanied us. I tape-recorded our conversation as we were escorted to Mostar through the many Bosnian Christian and Muslim checkpoints.

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 pilferer on his way to cut wood. (b)(3)(n)



Mostar chemical agent and munitions production building (photos supplied by author). (b)(3)(n)

We moved through the complex with cameras and tape recorder going. Upon entering the two-story headquarters building, the former (b)(1) shook his head in amazement at the shambles. He had not

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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 shelf-less technical library. On the way back to Split, we dropped the former (b)(1) [redacted] off at his home in Mostar and spent a few moments in the city's park. It had been turned into a cemetery filled with recently interred victims of the war, with Christians and Muslims buried side by side. Our Croatian driver got us to Split just in time to catch the flight to Zagreb. Within weeks, bitter fighting intensified around Mostar. (b)(3)(n) [redacted]

Exposing Program Secrets (b)(3)(n) [redacted]

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

sources, our own experience at the Mostar complex, and subsequent trips by the US Defense Attaché to collect documents, many questions could be answered. On one of my many later visits to Zagreb, I was asked to take charge of 16 boxes of Mostar documents being sent to Washington. After a succession of military flights, I arrived home with a sense of accomplishment. The Mostar documents not only gave details of the institution's research, but also explained all phases of the site's construction. The attaché had removed all of the blueprints from the engineer's shelves, in a building that was destroyed the next year. (b)(3)(n) [redacted]

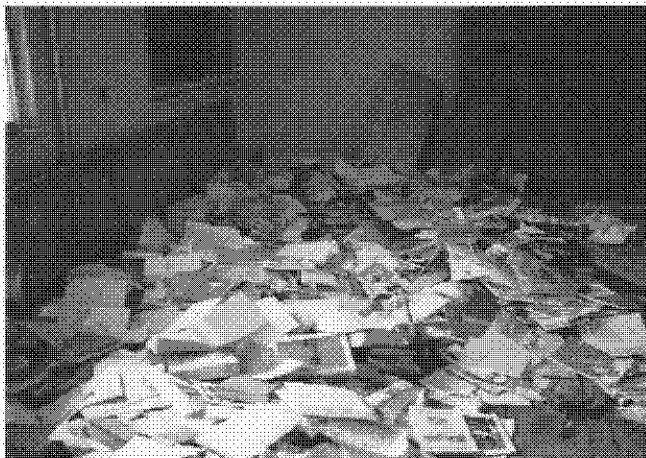
Why had the Serbs left so much information behind when they

abandoned the institute? On 5 January 1992, Zagreb radio explained: "The day has been quiet in the town except for the alarming news that early yesterday afternoon the occupation army, using two tanks, three *pinzgäuers*¹, and two trucks full of soldiers, entered the premises of the Military Technical Institute, which is in the Bjelo Polje town suburb... After taking the institute, occupation troops told the employees to leave and asked them to report back to work as late as 28 February." (b)(3)(n) [redacted]

Anticipating the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Serbs had begun to dismantle their offensive CW program by late 1991. (b)(1) [redacted]

(b)(1) [redacted] 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 (b)(3)(n) [redacted]

¹A *pinzgäuer* is an Austrian-made 4x4 soft-top truck that is used much like a US HMMWV ("Humvee"). (b)(3)(n) [redacted]



Technical library in shambles (b)(3)(n) [redacted]



Pipes discarded during evacuation of Mostar plant. (b)(3)(n) [redacted]

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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.

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

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How did the former Yugoslavia hide its chemical weapons program?

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

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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

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view of the surrounding area. [redacted] told us that these look-outs also provided critical early warning of forest fires—fires were always a concern, because trash was regularly burned at a nearby city dump. At one point, according to legal records found among the Mostar documents, a few dozen villagers tapped into the plant's dedicated water line; however, the government chose not to prosecute to protect the true purpose of the facility.

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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.

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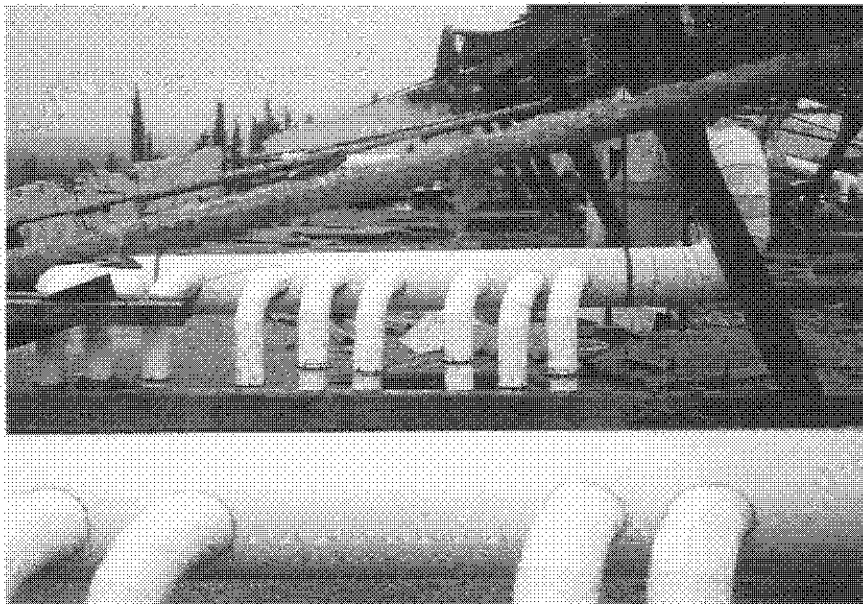
The chemical munitions themselves were carefully disguised.

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[redacted] told me 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,

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the Mostar facility began to produce the riot-control agent CS for commercial sale. This tear-producing chemical powder was shipped



Toxic air-handling vents exposed.

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The source answered: 'If you have equipment that only makes chocolate milk, then what would you think the equipment produced?'

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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. (b)(3)(n)

The Serbs took additional steps to disguise their CW program. (b)(1)

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Beginning in 1968, secret CW field trials were held each September in Krivolak 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. (b)(1)

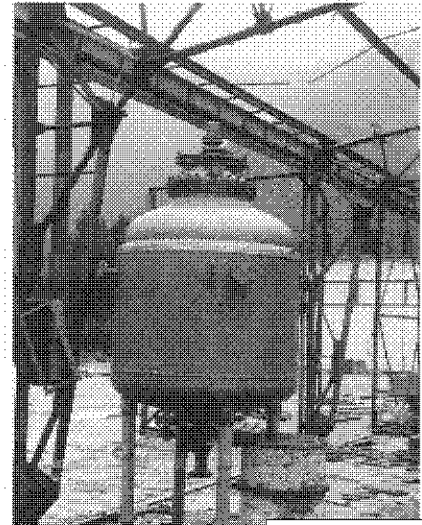
One image even showed tests underway, although the nature of the activity could not have been determined from the imagery alone. In (b)(1)

June 1996, 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 expended chemical munitions (b)(3)(n)

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 D. Boskovic, 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 (b)(1)

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Most of the CW-related equipment was



Mostar reactor made by French company DeDietrich (b)(3)(n)

purchased and delivered in 1958, a time when few collection and analytic resources were devoted to Yugoslavia. (b)(3)(n)

Where Things Stand Now (b)(3)(n)

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 Iskra complex at Baric, 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 phosphene production, suggesting that they were knowledgeable about the cover-up. Belgrade suspended participation in the Conference. Following the breakup of the country in 1990,

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

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

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