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Canada may have known about Japanese WWII anthrax experiments

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VANCOUVER (CP) -- The Canadian government likely had access to information about Japan's use of biological weapons on Chinese prisoners during the Second World War, a historian claims in a research paper released Wednesday.

But whether the post-war government made use of data in its own research on biological weapons is unknown, says John Price, an associate professor of Japanese history at the University of Victoria.

In his paper, Price argues that certain Canadian officials likely had access to reports on Japanese use of anthrax on Chinese villages, suggesting the information was passed on by American military officials.

In his conclusion, Price writes "scientists employed by the (Canadian) Defence Research Board probably had access to and made use of the information obtained from the experimentation on humans in China."

It's a controversial assertion, said another expert in the area of Canadian biological weapon research.

"I've never seen any evidence of that being the case," Donald Avery, a professor at the University of Western Ontario, said in an interview Wednesday.

But he noted Price may have seen documentation he was not aware of.

"That the Japanese conducted these experiments on human beings and that the Americans obtained this information and did not prosecute the war criminals that were involved in this is well known," said Avery. "Irrefutable."

What is less clear is what sort of access the Canadians and British had to that information, he said.

"This was a tightly guarded secret," said Avery.

The paper was released in advance of a two-day conference beginning Friday on Japanese biological warfare experiments before and during the Second World War.

In his paper, Price includes testimony from former Chinese prisoners who said the Japanese subjected them to anthrax, "experiencing swollen lymph nodes, tumours and - in the case of many -- death."

He notes that, in 1997, 180 Chinese filed suit in Japan against the Japanese government over attacks on villages with biological weapons during the war.

According to the paper, a 2002 ruling in the case by a panel of judges acknowledged the Japanese had indeed subjected the Chinese to biological weapons.

Price argued Canada was aware during the Second World War of rumours the Japanese were using biological weapons, referring to documents shared between the U.S. and Canadian military during the war.

"Although there has been no thorough examination of the postwar program there is enough documentation available to shed significant light on the extremely tight collaboration among Canadian, U.S. and British scientists and officials," he writes.

"And it is here that we find the most important evidence that Canadian officials knew and may have benefited from the information obtained from the Japanese perpetrators of warfare."

(Canadian Press)