

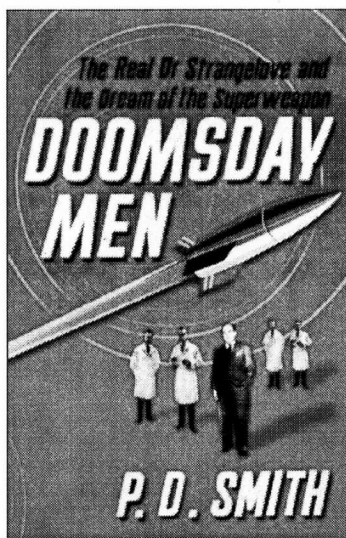
BOOK: DOOMSDAY MEN: THE REAL DR STRANGELOVE AND THE DREAM OF THE SUPERWEAPON

Talk of megadeath grips and disturbs

Doomsday Men relates the grim story of increasing barbarism during the 20th century, associated with scientific advancement and the pursuit of superweapons. Its author, an honorary research fellow at UCL, has been researching and writing about the relationship between science and literature for some time. Smith demonstrates in detail that weapons development springs from a deep well of culture, as well as politics. Science fiction and fact ran consistently close throughout the 20th century and cross-fertilised each other.

Goethe's tale *Faust* suggested that knowledge is worthless—even dangerous—without self-knowledge. At the end of the 19th century there was enormous public support for science because it offered hope of material progress for mankind. Smith argues that, like Faust, scientists gained terrible knowledge during the 20th century, at great cost: designing weapons of mass destruction, they sacrificed much of the idealism about science in the service of humanity.

Many others have written about the horrors of the First World War, but Smith focuses on the scientists involved. He graphically describes Fritz Haber's obsessional research into battlefield uses of lethal gases, later fictionalized by André Malraux in his novel *The Walnut Trees of Altenburg* and by Tony Harrison in his play *Square Rounds*. Many thousands of soldiers and civilians died, painfully but fairly quickly, while some survived to



suffer the rest of their days. It is little wonder that Haber's wife Clara became distressed enough to commit suicide. Otto Hahn too decided to work on chemical warfare, supported by Lise Meitner who told him: 'If you don't do it, someone else will'; false reasoning since repeated many times.

Smith reports: 'By the end of the war a total of 75 000 people—scientists and service personnel—were engaged in chemical weapons development.' He quotes a journalist for the *Boston Herald*, writing in 1916, to indicate public reaction to the misuse of science: 'Today we stand horror-stricken before the evidence of inhumanities only made possible through scientific advancement...Chemistry, you stand indicted and shamed before the Bar of History! You have prostituted your genius to fell and ogreish devices...You have turned killer and run with the wolf pack.'

At the turn of the 20th century, the dream of scientific mass murder found expression in novels and stories about biological weapons by writers including Simon Newcomb, Jack London and M P Shiel. In the 1930s reality imitated fiction when Japan set up Unit 731, a research and production complex covering more than two square miles. Here the fiercely nationalistic doctor Shiro Ishii developed and tested biological and chemical agents on thousands of Koreans.

The firebombing of cities like Dresden and Tokyo late in the Second World War inspired Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five*. As prisoners of war, Vonnegut and other GIs had to collect corpses after the Dresden raid. What they found in basements resembled 'a streetcar full of people who'd simultaneously had heart failure. Just people sitting there in their chairs, all dead. A firestorm is an amazing thing. It doesn't occur in nature. It's fed by tornadoes that occur in the midst of it and there isn't a damn thing to breathe. We had no idea that our side was capable of such indiscriminate destruction.' It was, Vonnegut said, 'a total calamity of civilization.' Since 1980, the use of incendiary bombing on civilian targets has been prohibited under international law.

Science fiction writers had imagined atomic bombs long before scientists thought them possible. At the start of the 20th century a succession of stories, from H G Wells, Edward

