

A HISTORY OF BIOWEAPONS DISINFORMATION

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A LONG HISTORY OF FALSE CLAIMS

Russia's current allegations about "questionable" activities at Ukraine public health labs tie into a long history of false claims and "active measures" about biological weapons stretching back to the Cold War.

An early example is from the Korean War in the early 1950s. North Korea, China and the Soviet Union alleged at the time that the United States had carried out hundreds of air-drops of insects (flies, fleas, spiders and ticks) infected with plague, anthrax, cholera and other diseases. In-depth reviews of the allegations by independent chemical and biological weapons experts using documents obtained from former Soviet archives demonstrated that the charges were "contrived and fraudulent" and that they did not "stand up, scientifically or historically."

Some of historical disinformation narratives, such as operations Tarakany and Denver, have involved biological labs.

OPERATION TARAKANY

This Soviet disinformation campaign from the early 1980s alleged the Pakistan Malaria Research Centre in Lahore was a US Central Intelligence Agency-funded lab to breed weaponised mosquitoes. It characterised the Americans working at the lab as "poisoners from overseas" and alleged that they were plotting to infect cattle herds in Afghanistan.

- ◆ In fact, the Pakistan Malaria Research Centre was a University of Maryland-supported lab researching malaria. The disinformation campaign was an effort to throw doubt on evidence the United States was making available to the United Nations and the wider public about Soviet use of chemical weapons in Southeast Asia.

OPERATION DENVER

A second, more widely-known Soviet disinformation campaign from the early 1980s alleged that the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) was genetically engineered by the United States as part of a biowarfare program at the US Army's Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) at Fort Detrick, Maryland.

- ◆ In fact, HIV spilled over to humans from chimpanzees in African forests. The disinformation campaign was an effort to strengthen anti-American sentiments in the world and to fan domestic political controversies in the United States involving the gay and immigrant communities.

KEY MESSAGES

There are significant differences between Cold War disinformation campaigns and Russia's contemporary disinformation campaigns.

- ◆ **New platforms of dissemination.** Previously, disinformation would be spread through traditional print media; now, international disarmament and security structures such as *notes verbales*, General Assembly and Security Council meetings, Arria formula sessions, and media briefings at the UN are co-opted along with traditional and social media to spread and legitimise the disinformation.
- ◆ **New actors.** Previously, disinformation would quote obscure experts in obscure media outlets; now, some of the most senior officials in the Russian government deliver disinformation directly at press conference or using social media.
- ◆ **Speed of information spread.** Previously, disinformation would take weeks and months to spread; now, disinformation is live streamed and instantaneously shared.



READ MORE

Leitenberg, M (2020) 'False allegations of biological-weapons use from Putin's Russia,' *The Nonproliferation Review* 27(4-6): 425-442.

Rid, T (2020) 'AIDS Made in the USA' in *Active measures: The secret history of disinformation and political warfare*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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