

SERGIEV POSAD-6: RUSSIA'S UPGRADED MILITARY BIOLOGICAL RESEARCH FACILITY AND THE LINK TO BIOWEAPONS DISINFORMATION IN UKRAINE



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INTRODUCTION

Using satellite images from 2022 to the present day, Washington Post journalists recently documented evidence of what appears to be significant upgrades to Russia's military biological facility at Sergiev Posad-6 near Moscow, with enhancements and enlargements to its high-containment facility, used to work on dangerous pathogens, and the expansion of the linked civilian site where scientists are housed.

The construction of this facility appeared to begin in May 2022 and coincided with an increase in biological weapons-related disinformation from Russia focused on Ukraine and its Western Allies, including false narratives around legitimate public health and biological research facilities. This briefing note explores this connection in more detail.

SOVIET AND RUSSIAN BIOWEAPONS DISINFORMATION

The USSR intentionally spread biological disinformation for decades during the Cold War, in part to distract from its own clandestine biological weapons development, as well as to undermine trust in the West. Despite being a signatory to, and special custodian of, the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC), the Soviet Union continued and accelerated its development and production of biological weapons throughout the Cold War, in direct contravention of its responsibilities under the BWC.

During this period, the USSR pursued several disinformation campaigns related to biological research and related facilities in other countries, the most well-known one being Operation Denver. A 1985 KGB telegram detailed the intentions of this malicious disinformation related to HIV-AIDS, indicating:

"The goal of these measures is to create a favorable opinion for us [the USSR] abroad that that this disease is the result of secret experiments with a new type of biological weapon by the secret services of the USA and the Pentagon that spun out of control."

Mikhail Gorbachev, the former leader of the Soviet Union, reportedly acknowledged and apologized to US President Ronald Reagan for spreading this disinformation.

This disinformation operation was ongoing while Soviet researchers pursued weaponization programs for dozens of biological agents, including those causing smallpox, plague, anthrax, Ebola virus disease and Marburg virus disease.

In 1992, Russian president Boris Yeltsin publicly acknowledged the continued existence of an active Russian biological weapons program, with military officials in the Russian Federation having continued rather than dismantled the USSR's biological weapons program after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Sergiev Posad-6 site (originally known as Zagorsk-6) is one of three key military biological research laboratories in Russia, known to have been involved in the USSR's offensive bioweapons program, that international experts have never been granted access to inspect.

The United States maintains that the Russian bioweapons program continues to exist today, and on 1 May 2024, the US State Department announced it was sanctioning three Russian government entities associated with Russia's chemical and biological weapons programs, as well as four Russian companies that have contributed to such entities. The Sergiev Posad site was among these newly sanctioned Russian government entities, falling

under the Russian Ministry of Defence's Federal State Budgetary Institution 48th Central Scientific-Research Institute (48-i Tsentralnyi nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut, abbreviated in Russian as the 48th TSNII). According to the State Department, this is the leading Russian Ministry of Defence scientific research institute responsible for military protection against infectious diseases and biological threats. The 48th TSNII incorporates biological facilities in Sergiev Posad (48 Central Scientific Research Institute Sergiev Posad), Kirov (48 Central Scientific Research Institute Kirov) and Ekaterinburg (48 Central Scientific Research Institute Ekaterinburg).

MODERN DAY BIOWEAPONS DISINFORMATION

There are stark parallels to historical disinformation campaigns in the present day. While Russia further developed its high-containment facility at the Sergiev Posad-6 military research site, it also increased its efforts to spread disinformation targeting the Ukrainian public health system and other peaceful biological research laboratories in Ukraine, including falsely accusing these facilities of developing biological weapons.

On 11 March 2022, shortly after Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Mission to the United Nations requested a meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss unfounded allegations of military biological activities in Ukraine in relation to public health laboratories. Following this, Russia circulated a note verbale to Security Council members falsely accusing Ukraine of having a biological weapons program and continued to circulate statements and materials accusing the United States and Ukraine of biological weapons development. In May 2022, as evidenced by satellite imagery, the Russian military began preparing the ground to expand the high-containment military facility at Sergiev Posad. At the same time, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov continued to falsely accuse the US of developing biological weapons in Ukraine and the Russian Federation subsequently initiated the formal mechanisms of the BWC by invoking both Article V and Article VI of the convention. Of note, a vast majority of States Parties that participated in the resulting BWC Formal Consultation in September 2022 dismissed Russia's allegations as entirely unfounded.

Ironically, the Ukrainian laboratories alleged by Russia to be engaged in bioweapons efforts had lengthy and well-documented track records of peaceful collaboration with a range of international partners. These threat reduction efforts began in the early 1990s through the US-led Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program that worked, *inter alia*, to demilitarize the Soviet biological weapons infrastructure and to redirect former weapons scientists into peaceful roles. The Russian Federation was initially a participant in these peaceful efforts, it played an important role in the establishment by the G8 of the Global Partnership against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction (2002) and collaborated on the delivery of a wide array of WMD threat reduction programming in Russia over the next decade. However, in 2014 following its annexation of Crimea, Russia was suspended from the G8 and the Global Partnership and has subsequently initiated significant disinformation campaigns targeting some of these very same facilities. It is noteworthy that Russia's disinformation campaign against Ukraine was denounced by the International Science and Technology Center (ISTC), which declared:

"These accusations are part of the Russian government's absurd attempt to provide a plausible rationale for its unjust and unprovoked war against Ukraine. They are blatantly false and have been discredited numerous times. Until 2015, the Russian Federation hosted the ISTC and benefitted from approximately \$1.5 billion of funding from states parties to the ISTC, including the U.S and the EU, to support Russian weapons scientists—including Russian biological scientists—in their transition to peaceful research. During the two-plus decades that Russia was an ISTC Party and ISTC Governing Board member, the Russian Federation directly approved the very same ISTC biological research and infrastructure projects that Russia is now slandering."

MOTIVATIONS FOR SPREADING BIOWEAPON DISINFORMATION

Disinformation has been regularly used by malicious actors to obfuscate or justify their own actions and undermine others. There are numerous motivations for creating and disseminating disinformation. It is important to be aware of these motivations so that effective strategies can be developed to pre-empt and counter such attacks. Some common motivations include:

- **Misdirection:** As detailed by the Soviet example above, Russian disinformation has previously been used to accuse its adversaries of the nefarious activities that Russia itself is conducting.
- **Creation of Confusion:** Linked to this, a flood or ‘firehose’ of disinformation may be used to overwhelm and confuse the information space, making it difficult for individuals to recognize what information is accurate and what is false. This can create an environment where malicious activity can remain undetected or difficult to discern from reality.
- **Justification:** Russia has repeatedly used false accusations of biological weapons development in Ukraine, often by NATO allies, and the promotion of false narratives regarding broader WMD threats as justification for its illegal war on Ukraine.
- **Undermining Trust:** Disinformation about bioweapons undermines trust in and support for Western countries and the rules-based international system, including multilateral disarmament fora.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Allegations against the US and Ukraine](#)
- [The Lugar Center disinformation campaign](#)
- [Tactic Spotlight: Reference to past crises](#)
- [A history of bioweapons disinformation](#)

VIDEOS

- [What is disinformation](#)
- [What is bioweapons disinformation](#)
- [How to counter disinformation](#)

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