

OPERATION DENVER



HISTORICAL NARRATIVE SERIES

BACKGROUND

In the early 1980s, the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic marked the onset of a global public health crisis. Limited scientific knowledge at the time fuelled widespread fear, speculation and social stigma, particularly against vulnerable communities, including gay and black populations. Amid this climate, the Soviet Union launched a disinformation campaign to exploit these anxieties, strategically intensifying social and political divisions. The most infamous aspect of this campaign was the false narrative that HIV was a man-made virus engineered by the US government as a biological weapon, allegedly originating from the US Army's Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) at Fort Detrick, Maryland.

Against the broader geopolitical tensions of the Cold War, this disinformation campaign sought to deepen mistrust in US institutions and stoke anti-American sentiment worldwide. Although scientists later confirmed that HIV originated from chimpanzees in Central Africa, the campaign had a lasting impact on public perception, further destabilising the US domestically and straining the already tense international environment.

THE OPERATION

The Soviet disinformation campaign, known as Operation INFEKTION, or Denver, deployed a multifaceted strategy that targeted media outlets globally. Key actions included:

- ◆ **Jakob Segal's report:** Russian-born biophysicist Jakob Segal published a false report alleging that the AIDS virus was artificially engineered in a US military lab. This report was strategically disseminated in Western media, including newspapers in the US and the UK, to lend credibility to the false claim.
- ◆ **Anonymous letter in *The Patriot*:** Soviet operatives planted an anonymous letter in *The Patriot*, a small New Delhi newspaper, accusing the US of manufacturing HIV/AIDS as a biological weapon. This publication, funded by the Soviets, was intended to give the disinformation campaign a foothold in the Global South, from where it could spread globally, creating ripples far beyond New Delhi.
- ◆ **Media manipulation:** The campaign was spread not only through fringe publications but also through mainstream Western media outlets such as CBS News. The disinformation infiltrated a wide array of media, including press targeting black and gay communities. This diverse media landscape was exploited to appeal to various ideological and social biases, maximising the reach and impact of the false narrative.

OBJECTIVES AND RATIONALE

Linking the AIDS conspiracy theory to biological warfare aligned with the Soviet Union's Cold War tactics aimed at undermining US credibility. By fostering the belief that the US government was responsible for creating and spreading the virus, the Soviet Union sought to exacerbate existing tensions within American society, particularly among marginalised communities, as well as between the US and other nations. This campaign successfully convinced some mainstream Western media outlets to propagate the disinformation, exploiting racial, political and ideological divisions. It tapped into pre-existing fears, such as the unethical behaviour of government institutions in scientific research (e.g. the Tuskegee syphilis experiment), weaponising those fears for geopolitical gain.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Operation Denver had far-reaching consequences on both domestic and international fronts. Domestically within the US, the campaign intensified mistrust in government institutions, particularly among marginalised communities already bearing the brunt of social stigma and public health disparities. By linking HIV/AIDS to a deliberate government plot, the disinformation campaign fueled conspiracy theories that cast US health and military institutions as malicious actors. This perception further isolated affected communities, especially black and gay populations, aggravating existing social tensions and hampering early HIV prevention efforts by undermining public trust in health guidance.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ **Diplomatic Strain:** The campaign further strained already tense US-Soviet relations during the Cold War. The spread of disinformation exacerbated mistrust between the superpowers, particularly as both governments accused each other of using the AIDS crisis for geopolitical gain. The mistrust fostered by the campaign hindered cooperation between the two countries, deepening the Cold War divide.
- ◆ **Global Mistrust in Science and Medicine:** The campaign contributed to global skepticism of the true origins of HIV/AIDS and fed into long-standing fears of government secrecy and misuse of science. This led to increased difficulty in combatting not just HIV/AIDS, but public health crises more broadly, as populations were more likely to question the intentions of governments and medical experts.
- ◆ **Exacerbation of Social Divisions:** By spreading disinformation across diverse media, including publications focused on black and gay communities, the Soviets fueled existing social tensions, particularly among those already marginalised by the epidemic. These efforts heightened public hysteria and suspicion towards institutions and contributed to stigmatising those most affected by the virus, including the LGBTQ+ community.
- ◆ **Lessons Learned:** This campaign shows how disinformation efforts exploit public health crises to further political or ideological agendas. Operation Denver displayed many of the same features that modern disinformation campaigns show, including unfounded claims of a lab origin and heightening of distrust in governments, particularly in the West.



READ MORE

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