

# OPERATION TARAKANY



## HISTORICAL NARRATIVE SERIES

### BACKGROUND

In the early 1980s, during heightened Cold War tensions, the Soviet Union launched a targeted disinformation campaign against the Pakistan Malaria Research Centre (MRC) as part of a broader strategy to undermine US credibility in the region. Named Operation Tarakany (“cockroach” in Russian, symbolising pest control), the campaign falsely alleged that the MRC, which was supported by the US University of Maryland, was a front for CIA-funded biological warfare research. Soviet media claimed that American scientists were breeding mosquitoes at the MRC to infect Afghan nomads with diseases, including encephalitis.

This campaign unfolded in the context of escalating conflicts between the US and Soviet Union, particularly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The US, through covert CIA support, backed Afghan mujahideen forces resisting the Soviet occupation, further intensifying ideological rivalry. In this period, both superpowers accused one another of biological and chemical warfare, with the US presenting evidence of Soviet chemical weapon use in Southeast Asia. The USSR responded with Operation Tarakany, deflecting attention from these allegations by casting suspicion on US-aligned institutions in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

### THE OPERATION

The operational tactics of the Soviet disinformation campaign centred around specific allegations regarding US involvement in biological warfare:

- ◆ **Targeting the Pakistan Malaria Research Centre:** The campaign alleged that this facility, supported by the US University of Maryland and dedicated to malaria eradication, was actually a CIA-funded lab for biological warfare. Soviet media, particularly the *Literary Gazette*, claimed that American scientists were breeding mosquitoes to infect Afghan nomads with diseases like encephalitis.
- ◆ **Impact on US Initiatives:** As a direct consequence of these accusations, Dr. David Nelin, an American scientist from the University of Maryland, was expelled from Pakistan. This event not only damaged US medical and scientific efforts in the country but also strained US-Pakistan relations.

Soviet Tactics Utilised:

- ◆ **Propaganda:** The dissemination of false claims through Soviet-controlled media was pivotal. Journalists purportedly visited the lab, which added a layer of credibility to the fabricated narrative.
- ◆ **Exaggerated Claims:** Allegations suggested that American scientists were creating “particularly poisonous mosquitoes” capable of spreading deadly diseases, tapping into Cold War-era fears surrounding biological warfare.
- ◆ **Exploitation of Local Sentiment:** The disinformation sought to provoke fear in Pakistan and Afghanistan, leveraging local anxieties about foreign intervention and biological threats.

### OBJECTIVES AND RATIONALE

The Soviet disinformation campaign had several clear objectives aimed at undermining US operations in the region:

- ◆ **Discredit US Operations:** The Soviet leadership sought to damage the credibility of US initiatives, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan, by portraying American aid as a guise for biological warfare experiments.
- ◆ **Shift the Narrative:** As the US was providing evidence of Soviet chemical weapons use to the United Nations, the Soviets aimed to divert attention from their own activities by accusing the US of breeding

“killer mosquitoes” to spread diseases in Afghanistan.

- ◆ **Sow Local Distrust:** By suggesting CIA involvement in breeding weaponised mosquitoes, the Soviets intended to instil fear and mistrust towards American scientific and humanitarian efforts in the region, ultimately weakening US-Pakistan relations at a critical time.
- ◆ **Escalate Regional Fear:** The campaign included claims that the US was stockpiling chemical weapons in Pakistan, aiming to heighten regional anxiety and position American actions as a broader threat to Pakistan and its neighbours.

## OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The Soviet disinformation campaign achieved several objectives: it sowed fear and mistrust toward American scientific initiatives in the region, strained US-Pakistan relations, and reinforced the Soviet narrative that US aid masked a hidden agenda. This operation demonstrates the USSR’s strategic use of propaganda coupled with disinformation and fearmongering to exploit local anxieties about foreign intervention and biological threats, while also deflecting global attention from its own activities.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ **Strategic objectives:** Operation Tarakany primarily aimed to damage US credibility in Pakistan and Afghanistan, undermining American influence in a region critical to Cold War strategy. By framing US-backed humanitarian efforts as biological warfare, the Soviet Union sought to disrupt local support for American operations and shift international scrutiny away from its own alleged use of chemical weapons.
- ◆ **Audiences:** The communication strategies employed in Operation Tarakany were limited, focusing mainly on internal Russian audiences and intelligence channels. Although current campaigns often feature global strategies, utilising international media, public diplomacy and strategic narratives, domestic audiences remain an important audience in disinformation campaigns.
- ◆ **Lessons Learned:** This campaign shows how disinformation efforts work to exploit societal fears. Today, efforts to combat modern diseases are similarly complicated by misleading claims that thwart response efforts and reinforce existing community divisions.

## READ MORE

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