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## False allegations of biological-weapons use from Putin's Russia

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### ABSTRACT

From 1949 until 1988, the Soviet Union conducted a nearly continuous campaign of false allegations of biological-weapon (BW) use by the United States. In 1995, senior Russian military officials revived this pattern of false allegations, which continues to the present day. Russian officials amplified the campaign after the US government funded the transformation of former Soviet BW facilities in the Commonwealth of Independent States under the Nunn–Lugar program. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in China in January 2020 prompted a very greatly expanded Russian-government BW-related disinformation effort. This paper aims to present a reasonably comprehensive account of these activities and to assess their significance. The Russian government under President Vladimir Putin has demonstrated open disdain for both the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention.


### KEYWORDS

biological weapons;  
disinformation; fake news;  
COVID-19; Russia; Georgia

Starting only a few years after the end of World War II, in 1949, and lasting until 1988 under General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union maintained a nearly continuous campaign of false allegations of biological-weapon (BW) use by the United States. Never in history has any other country carried on such a campaign of false BW allegations. Several individual campaigns lasted well over a decade. At times, Soviet allies in Eastern Europe or Cuba assisted by introducing their own false BW allegations, Cuba alone accounting for about 20 such instances.

After a few years' pause between 1988 and 1995, senior Russian military officials began repeating the old false allegations. Russian officials amplified the campaign after the US government funded the transformation of former Soviet BW facilities in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) under the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program. The Russian disinformation campaign blossomed into a continuous propaganda campaign to which was added denial of the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons for six years and Russia's own use of an advanced organophosphate compound in a 2018 assassination attempt against a retired KGB agent living in the United Kingdom, and a second use in August 2020 against the leader of the political opposition in Russia. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in China in January 2020 prompted a very great expansion of Russian-government BW-related disinformation.

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## Soviet false allegations and their results

The Soviet campaign of false allegations of BW use by the United States was unprecedented. It began in 1949 and was continuously maintained until 1988. It consisted of three major campaigns and no less than 10 campaigns of lesser international significance.<sup>1</sup> Soviet allies became involved as well; the allegation of US use of Colorado potato beetles, dubbed *Amikäfer* (“Yankee beetles”), was initiated by the German Democratic Republic in 1950 and was soon joined by Poland and Czechoslovakia.<sup>2</sup> Cuba’s allegations of BW use by the United States began in 1964 and lasted until 1997. Cuba charged the United States with using BW of every variety—against people, plants, and animals—on 18 different occasions, in each case alleging the use of a different BW agent.<sup>3</sup>

The first of the three major international campaigns was carried out by the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea between 1951 and 1953, alleging US use of BW over both North Korea and China during the Korean War. The Communist states brought false allegations of US use of BW to bear against the effort by United Nations forces to reverse the North Korean invasion of South Korea. Left-wing organizations in Western European nations mobilized millions of people to march in European capitals against “the Bacterial War.” Heinrich Brandweiner, an Austrian, published *Schwarzbuch über den Bakterienkrieg* [Black book about the Bacterial War], for which the Soviet Union awarded him the Lenin Peace Prize. Reverend James G. Endicott of Canada was awarded the 1951 Stalin Peace Prize for his “condemnation of the American use of germ warfare in China.” Both Brandweiner and Endicott were members of the World Peace Council, an organization controlled by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).<sup>4</sup>

Only in 1998 did it become possible to verify that this accumulation of allegations had been concocted and false. A dozen cables to Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung from the files of the Soviet Central Committee, dating from an interval directly after the death of Josef Stalin between April 13 and June 2, 1953, became available in 1988. One cable to Mao read,

For Mao Zedong: The Soviet Government and the Central Committee of the [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] were misled. The spread in the press of information about the use by the Americans of bacteriological weapons in Korea was based on false information. The accusations against the Americans were fictitious.

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<sup>1</sup> This history is described in detail in Milton Leitenberg and Raymond Zilinskas, *The Soviet Biological Weapons Program: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 407–22.

<sup>2</sup> In his research during the late 1990s for a book, *Schwarzer Tod und Amikäfer: Biologische Waffen und Ihre Geschichte* [Black death and Yankee beetles: biological weapons and their history], Erhard Geissler found letters between the top political figures in the German Democratic Republic in 1950 (Walter Ulbricht, the first secretary of the Communist Party of the new East Germany, and his prime minister, Otto Grotewohl), discussing the disinformation campaign. Personal communication, Dr. Erhard Geissler, October 2000. See also “Radio Free Europe and the Invasion of the Colorado Beetles—Fake News,” *Cold War Radio Vignettes*, July 24, 2018, <<https://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2018/07/radio-free-europe-and-invasion-of.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Zilinskas, “Cuban Allegations of Biological Warfare by the United States: Assessing the Evidence,” *Critical Reviews in Microbiology*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1999), pp. 173–228, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10408419991299202>>; Milton Leitenberg, *The Problem of Biological Weapons* (Stockholm: National Defense College, 2004), pp. 78–84; Charles H. Calisher, “Scientist in a Strange Land: A Cautionary Tale,” *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 16 (2009), pp. 509–19, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700903255151>>.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Romerstein, “Disinformation as a KGB Weapon in the Cold War,” *Journal of Intelligence History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2001), pp. 56–57.

To give recommendations:

To cease publication in the press of materials accusing the Americans of using bacteriological weapons in Korea and China.<sup>5</sup>

Although self-serving and self-exculpatory, the Soviet government's sharp reversal—albeit in diplomatic privacy—after the years of false allegations were a part of the succession struggle in the Soviet leadership between Nikita Khrushchev and Lavrenti Beria. The struggle for political power between several of Stalin's immediate subordinates after his death, primarily Khrushchev, Beria, and Malenkov, was ostensibly fought over three proxy issues. Surprisingly, one of the three issues was the false Korean War BW allegations, for which the Soviet Union had provided the major international political support. Beria had forced the sequence of communications with Mao and Kim Il Sung as part of his struggle against Khrushchev. Beria attacked a Khrushchev protégé, Semen D. Ignatiev, minister of state security, accusing Ignatiev of concealing from the Soviet Central Committee a document that he had obtained in April 1952. The document demonstrated that the Chinese charges of US use of BW were false and had, Beria said, the result that “the prestige of the Soviet Union ... suffered real political damage.”<sup>6</sup> In 2014, Chinese documentation became available that also indicated that the allegations were false. Nevertheless, the Chinese and North Korean governments still maintain the false allegations.<sup>7</sup> Astonishingly, too, an essay published by the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2000, written by an historian of science, reverted to the old charges that the United States had used BW against China and North Korea during the Korean War.<sup>8</sup>

The many subsequent Soviet allegations of BW use by the United States were never actually voiced by Soviet officials or brought before any international agency. They were, however, remarkably successful. The history of the second major disinformation campaign is illustrative. In 1982, the Soviets targeted an antimalarial research laboratory in Pakistan with false claims. The facility had been in operation for nearly 20 years and Soviet agencies had been attacking it for years. Pakistan was a US ally, and US-funded research projects involving mosquitoes were in progress at the facility. This provided an opportunity for the Soviets to accuse the United States of spreading disease in the country.

The Soviet aim was presumably to mobilize Pakistani public opinion against the country's alliance with the United States. A story in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, a Soviet weekly newspaper, claimed that the laboratory was genetically engineering “killer mosquitoes” and releasing them in Afghanistan, where Soviet forces were fighting at the time. The *Literaturnaya Gazeta* article also claimed that the facility was funded by the CIA and “is

<sup>5</sup> Milton Leitenberg, “New Russian Evidence on the Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 11 (Winter 1998), p. 183, <[www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/bulletin-no-11-winter-1998](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/bulletin-no-11-winter-1998)>.

<sup>6</sup> Beria's accusation was contained in the Soviet Central Committee documents obtained in 1998. Kathryn Weathersby, “Deceiving the Deceivers: Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang and the Allegations of Biological Weapons Use in Korea,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Vol. 11 (Winter 1998), pp. 176–77.

<sup>7</sup> Milton Leitenberg, “China's False Allegations of the Use of Biological Weapons by the United States during the Korean War,” *Cold War International History Project Working Paper*, March 2016, <[www.cissm.umd.edu/publications/china%E2%80%99s-false-allegations-use-biological-weapons-united-states-during-korean-war](http://www.cissm.umd.edu/publications/china%E2%80%99s-false-allegations-use-biological-weapons-united-states-during-korean-war)>.

<sup>8</sup> Yelena Solomonovna Levina, “Experimental Biology in the System of Russian Security of the Second Half of the Twentieth Century: Biological Weapons or Health Care?” (in Russian), in *Nauka i bezopasnost' Rossii: Istoriko-nauchniye metodologicheskiye, istorico-tekhnicheskiye aspekty* [Russian science and security: historical–scientific methodological and historical–technical aspects] (Moscow: Nauka, letter to the editor, 2000), pp. 367–94.

developing banned biological weapons.” The Soviet campaign succeeded, and the laboratory was closed.<sup>9</sup>

By this time, BW disinformation produced by the KGB had also been describing US efforts to produce “ethnic weapons” for years. Remarkably, in 1985, the KGB spread the story that the United States and South Africa had invented a bomb that would kill Black people and leave white people alive. It also alleged that the United States and Israel had invented a bomb that would kill Arabs but leave Jews alive. The third major Soviet BW disinformation campaign followed a similar pattern and alleged that the US government had synthesized the HIV virus, which causes AIDS, and deliberately released it in Africa in order to destroy African populations.<sup>10</sup> Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin called it “probably the most successful anti-American active measure of the Gorbachev era, prompted by a mixture of overt propaganda and covert action by Service A” of the KGB.<sup>11</sup> A newly published study of the AIDS disinformation campaign deems it to have been among the Soviet Union’s “most successful propaganda efforts during the Cold War.”<sup>12</sup> The KGB planted the seeds of the campaign in July 1983 by publishing an anonymous letter to the editor in a small Indian newspaper, *The Patriot*, which the KGB had established in 1962 for the purpose of disseminating disinformation.<sup>13</sup> But not until an article appeared in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* in October 31, 1985, repeating the *Patriot* story, did the campaign get seriously underway.<sup>14</sup>

The general nature of the charge was that the AIDS virus had been genetically engineered at Fort Detrick, a US Army facility (at times, it was also alleged, with the assistance of the CIA), in the course of experiments to develop BW. To this was added the claim that the virus had been released in Africa in order to kill Africans. This allegation was repeated internationally in 13 countries in 1985, 49 in 1986, 67 in only six months in 1987, and in 32 Soviet media presentations during the same six-month period. It appeared in 2,000 newspapers in 25 countries.<sup>15</sup> Notably, all this took place after Mikhail Gorbachev became leader of the Soviet Union in 1985, when Soviet

<sup>9</sup> TASS, “CIA’s Lahore Mosquito Project” March 24, 1982; Vasili Mitrokhin, “KGB Active Measures in Southwest Asia in 1980–82,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Nos. 14–15 (2003–04), pp. 201–02, <[www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/bulletin-no-1415-winter-2003-spring-2004](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/bulletin-no-1415-winter-2003-spring-2004)>; Radio Moscow, “US CBW Facilities, Use Program Described,” March 24, 1982; Romerstein, “Disinformation as a KGB Weapon in the Cold War,” quoting *Sel’skaya Zhizn* [Agricultural Life], April 2, 1985 and Radio Moscow, Domestic Service, July 13, 1985.

<sup>10</sup> Leitenberg and Zilinskas, *The Soviet Biological Weapons Program*, pp. 414–17; US Department of State, *Soviet Influence Activities: A Report on Active Measures and Propaganda, 1986–87* (Washington, DC, 1987), pp. 33–51, <<http://jmw.typepad.com/files/state-department---a-report-on-active-measures-and-propaganda.pdf>>; Thomas Boghardt, “Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (2009), pp. 1–24; David A. Spetrino, “AIDS Disinformation,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 32 (Winter 1988), pp. 9–14; Erhard Geissler, “The AIDS Disinformation Campaign Continues and Bears Rotten Fruit,” *ASA Newsletter*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2010), p. 14; Erhard Geissler and Robert Hunt Sprinkle, “Disinformation Squared: Was the HIV-from-Fort-Detrick Myth a Stasi Success?” *Politics and the Life Sciences*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2013), pp. 2–99, <[https://doi.org/10.2990/32\\_2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.2990/32_2_2)>; Milton Leitenberg, “The Source of Lies about AIDS,” letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, December 31, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 224–45, 484.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Selvage, “Operation ‘Denver’: The East German Ministry of State Security and the KGB’s AIDS Disinformation Campaign, 1985–1986 (Part 1),” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2019), pp. 71–123. See also Mark Kramer, “Lessons from Operation ‘Denver,’ the KGB’s Massive AIDS Disinformation Campaign,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2020), <<https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/operation-denver-kgb-aids-disinformation-campaign/>>; Nicoli Nattros, *The AIDS Conspiracy: Science Fights Back* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> US Department of State, *Soviet Influence Activities, 1986–87*, pp. 34, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Valentin Zapevalov, “Panic in the West, or What Is Hiding behind the Sensation Surrounding AIDS” (in Russian), *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, October 30, 1985.

<sup>15</sup> Selvage, “Operation ‘Denver.’”

public-health officials were seeking US assistance for the control of AIDS in their own country. But it was also when information was beginning to appear in the United States about the Soviet Union's secret offensive BW program, which was a violation of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC).

On June 6, 1985, Charles Wick, director of the US Information Agency, met with Valentin Falin, head of the Novosti Press Agency and a Soviet Central Committee member. Wick demanded retraction of a Novosti Press Agency article titled "The Ethnic Weapon." Falin claimed that he could not recall the article and that Wick was indulging in "the language of the Cold War."<sup>16</sup> Falin was scarcely a nonentity: later on, in October 1988, he replaced the long-time Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, as head of the International Department in the Soviet Central Committee. US Secretary of State George Shultz subsequently also met with Falin, and then, in a meeting with Gorbachev on October 27, 1987, again demanded that the fallacious campaign be ended. At a Central Committee meeting with leaders of Soviet mass media in July 1987, Gorbachev had stated, "We tell the truth and nothing but the truth."<sup>17</sup> However, Gorbachev responded angrily to Shultz and attacked the Department of State's reports on Soviet disinformation that included discussion of the Soviet AIDS stories. Remarkably, Gorbachev "complained that issuing the report went against the *glasnost* spirit." Nevertheless, four days after Shultz's meeting with Gorbachev, the Soviet government newspaper *Izvestiya* published an article in which two prominent members of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Roald Sagdeev and Vitaly Goldansky, deplored the AIDS disinformation campaign.<sup>18</sup> But the KGB still would not give up, planting a repeat of the false story in a Ghanaian newspaper in January 1988.<sup>19</sup> It was, however, their last gasp. When the AIDS allegation campaign was finally silenced, it spelled the end of Soviet BW disinformation until the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.<sup>20</sup>

In 1992, two former senior Soviet intelligence professionals provided important information about the nature of Soviet BW disinformation and, crucially, the mechanisms of its production. On March 17, 1992, Yevgeny Primakov, head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), stated in an address to faculty and students of the Moscow State University Institute of International Relations, "the well known articles printed a few years ago in our central newspaper about AIDS supposedly originating from Pentagon laboratories ... exposing US scientists 'crafty' plot against mankind were fabricated in KGB offices."<sup>21</sup> Even more informative were the details supplied five months later

<sup>16</sup> Bill Keller, "American Outraged by Soviet Article," *New York Times*, June 6, 1987, <[www.nytimes.com/1987/06/06/world/american-outraged-by-soviet-article.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1987/06/06/world/american-outraged-by-soviet-article.html)>.

<sup>17</sup> "Meeting in the CPSU Central Committee with leaders of mass media and creative unions on further enhancing the role of the press, television and radio broadcasting in the process of perestroika," July 10, 1987, in Mikhail Gorbachev, *Sobranie Sochinenii* [Collected Works], (Moscow: Ves Mir, 2008), p. 267.

<sup>18</sup> Associated Press, "Soviet Disavows Charges that US Created AIDS," *New York Times*, November 5, 1987, <[www.nytimes.com/1987/11/05/us/soviet-disavows-charges-that-us-created-aids.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/05/us/soviet-disavows-charges-that-us-created-aids.html)>. Other senior US government officials, as well as US Ambassador Arthur Hartman, had already complained about the campaign, to no effect. Hartman did so on June 25, 1986, in a public letter.

<sup>19</sup> David B. Ottoway, "US Links Soviets to Disinformation," *Washington Post*, January 17, 1988, <[www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/01/17/us-links-soviets-to-disinformation/793a560e-ad54-4fd5-83b0-b85205aa4706/?utm\\_term=.299a978b85e8](http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/01/17/us-links-soviets-to-disinformation/793a560e-ad54-4fd5-83b0-b85205aa4706/?utm_term=.299a978b85e8)>.

<sup>20</sup> US Department of State, *Soviet Influence Activities: A Report on Active Measures and Propaganda, 1987-1988* (Washington, DC, 1989), pp. 1-4.

<sup>21</sup> *Izvestiya*, "Yevgeni Primakov Admits that the KGB Fabricated the Lie that AIDS Originated in Pentagon Laboratories," March 19, 1992, <[http://intellit.muskingum.edu/russia\\_folder/pcw\\_era/sect\\_13b.htm](http://intellit.muskingum.edu/russia_folder/pcw_era/sect_13b.htm)>.

by former KGB General Oleg Kalugin in *Moskovskaya Pravda*: “[T]he AIDS disinformation campaign was dreamed up in the ‘A’ Directorate of the Soviet Union KGB’s First Chief Directorate ... the American Section in the ‘A’ Directorate. An officer sits there and thinks about how he can put the United States in a compromising position or strike a blow against the Americans through disinformation.”<sup>22</sup> The “A” Directorate, or Service A, was the KGB section responsible for disinformation or “Active Measures.” In 1985, Service A was composed of approximately 80 officers located at KGB headquarters in the Moscow suburb of Yasenovo and another 30 to 40 officers in the offices of the Novosti Press Agency.<sup>23</sup>

If that is in fact how this fraud was born, this invention of a KGB officer in 1983 spawned an enormously successful operation. Its effects were greatest in Africa and among the African-American population in the United States. Nine public opinion surveys carried out between 1988 and 2008 with African-Americans found that an average of 43 percent of respondents believed that HIV was of man-made origin. Three of the nine surveys found positive responses of over 50 percent. A compilation of 20 public opinion surveys of African-Americans between 1990 and 2009 showed that an average of 28 percent of respondents believed that the purpose of genocide was involved in the origin of HIV.<sup>24</sup> Another, separate survey published in 2006 found that 30 percent of an African-American sample responded “true” to the statement “AIDS is an agent of genocide created by the US government to kill off minority populations.”<sup>25</sup>

Surveys also demonstrated that these conspiratorial beliefs “were not isolated to specific segments of the African-American population.”<sup>26</sup> Well-known figures in the African-American community openly professed this position. Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan “described AIDS as a ‘race-targeting’ weapon intended to kill African Americans.” Bill Cosby and Will Smith only went as far as saying that AIDS was man-made.<sup>27</sup> In an interview in *Rolling Stone* magazine in November 1992, the popular film producer Spike Lee said, “I’m convinced AIDS is a government-engineered disease. They got one thing wrong, they never realized it couldn’t just be contained to the groups it was intended to wipe out.” Lee explicitly labelled AIDS “genocide.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Moskovskaya Pravda*, August 15, 1992, cited in Romerstein, “Disinformation as a KGB Weapon in the Cold War,” 2001, p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> *Moskovskaya Pravda*, p. 61; Mark Kramer, personal communication, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Nicolì Natrass, “Understanding the Origins and Prevalence of AIDS Conspiracy Beliefs in the United States and South Africa,” *Sociology of Health and Illness*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2012), pp. 113–29, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9566.2012.01480.x>>.

<sup>25</sup> Michael W. Ross et al., “Conspiracy Beliefs about the Origin of HIV/AIDS in Four Racial/Ethnic Groups,” *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2006), pp. 342–44.

<sup>26</sup> Laura Bogart and Sheryl Thorburn, “Relationship of African Americans’ Sociodemographic Characteristics and Belief in Conspiracies about HIV/AIDS and Birth Control,” *Journal of the National Medical Association*, Vol. 98, No. 7 (2006), pp. 1144–50. See also Harlan L. Dalton, “AIDS in Blackface,” *Daedalus: Living with AIDS, Part II*, Vol. 118 No. 3 (1989), pp. 205–27.

<sup>27</sup> Roger Peabody, “African American People’s AIDS Conspiracy Beliefs Best Understood in Terms of Social Anxiety and Distrust, Not Ignorance,” *NAM Aidsmap*, January 29, 2015, <<https://infohep.org/African-American-peoples-AIDS-conspiracy-beliefs-best-understood-in-terms-of-social-anxiety-and-distrust-not-ignorance/page/2940657/>>.

<sup>28</sup> Spike Lee, “Interview/Benetton Advertisement,” *Rolling Stone*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1992), cited in Jacob Heller, “Rumors and Realities: Making Sense of HIV/AIDS Conspiracy Narratives and Contemporary Legends,” *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 105, No. 1 (2015), pp. 43–50, <<https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302284>>; Nat Hentoff, “Who Will Speak the Truth to Spike Lee?” *Washington Post*, December 19, 1992, <[www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1992/12/19/who-will-speak-the-truth-to-spike-lee-frivolous-claims-of-genocide-divide-people-and-trivialize-evil/69f7726c-f224-411f-b8c0-e0329630749c/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1992/12/19/who-will-speak-the-truth-to-spike-lee-frivolous-claims-of-genocide-divide-people-and-trivialize-evil/69f7726c-f224-411f-b8c0-e0329630749c/)>.

In a 2018 study, researchers found that 52 percent of black male homosexuals believed that “HIV is a manmade virus,” and 63 percent “endorsed at least one of eight HIV/AIDS conspiracy beliefs.”<sup>29</sup>

As of 2011, the old Soviet AIDS conspiracy story continued to be propagated by books sold on the internet and by dedicated websites. In 2017, Russian trolls used Twitter accounts to resurrect the old Soviet AIDS disinformation story that the United States had manufactured the AIDS virus. And, in February 2018, the French version of Sputnik News resurrected the claim that the AIDS virus had been produced at Fort Detrick. In 2019, *Russia Today* reposted similar disinformation.<sup>30</sup>

If one looks back at the major Soviet false BW allegation campaigns—that the United States had used BW during the Korean War, the effort to get US-supported public health facilities in the Indian subcontinent closed down, and the AIDS/genocide campaign—all were remarkably successful in achieving their aims.

To the catalogue of false Soviet BW allegations, one must add those made by Cuba. The many Soviet-era allegations, with the exception of those concerning the Korean War, were never made by Soviet government officials and were never brought before any international agency. That was not the case for the BW allegations made by the Cuban government. The Cuban allegations began in 1964 and lasted until 1997. Cuba charged the United States with using BW of every variety—against people, plants, and animals—on 18 different occasions, in each case alleging the use of a different BW agent.<sup>31</sup> In a formal note to the United Nations in May 1997, Cuba accused the United States of deliberately spreading a crop-destroying insect, *Thrips palmi*, over Cuban territory. The insect was endemic throughout the Caribbean and entomologists had been tracking its migration from the early 1980s as it made its way from one Caribbean island to the next and finally to all the islands surrounding Cuba. Nevertheless, when it finally reached Cuba, the Cuban government charged the United States with biological warfare and brought the charge to a special consultative meeting of states parties to the BWC in August 1997.<sup>32</sup>

## The revival of false allegations in the 1990s

After a lull of seven years, Russian BW disinformation resumed in 1995 during the tenure of President Boris Yeltsin. The techniques were the same, and the producers of the disinformation presumably included some of the same individuals who had done the work for the Soviet KGB, now transformed into the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). Obscure newspapers in Spain and Kenya, some of which had been used in previous decades, published stories alleging that various diseases and “biological weapons components” were leaking or being spread from US military bases in their countries, or that “the Americans

<sup>29</sup> Ronald A. Brooks, “HIV/AIDS Conspiracy Beliefs and Intention to Adopt HIV Pre-exposure Prophylaxis among Black Men Who Have Sex with Men in Los Angeles,” *International Journal of STD & AIDS*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2018), pp. 375–81.

<sup>30</sup> Douglas Selvage and Christopher Nehring, “Operation ‘Denver’: KGB and Stasi Disinformation Regarding AIDS,” Woodrow Wilson Center, History and Public Policy Program, July 22, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Raymond Zilinskas, “Cuban Allegations of Biological Warfare by the United States: Assessing the Evidence,” *Critical Reviews in Microbiology*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1999), pp. 173–228, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10408419991299202>>; Leitenberg, *The Problem of Biological Weapons*, pp. 78–84; Calisher, “Scientist in a Strange Land.”

<sup>32</sup> Leitenberg, *The Problem of Biological Weapons*, pp. 78–82.



were using the territory in African countries for biological research and development ... in particular the outbreak of Ebola haemorrhagic fever in Zaire.”<sup>33</sup>

Beginning in 1998, a second phase of Russian BW disinformation began. Senior Russian military officials who had been directly responsible for Russia’s own offensive biological and chemical weapons programs apparently took it upon themselves to resurrect many of the old Soviet-era disinformation stories that had not been repeated for more than a decade, and in some cases not since the 1950s. In a press interview in March 1998, Lieutenant General Valentin Yevstigneev, who until 1992 had headed the 15th Directorate of the General Staff, the element of the Ministry of Defense responsible for the Soviet Union’s offensive BW program—and who, until the end of 2000, headed a renamed but otherwise little-altered body—resurrected the charge “that AIDS was created in a military laboratory abroad.”<sup>34</sup> In a 1999 interview in a Russian academic arms-control journal, Yevstigneev suggested that the “mass emergence of Colorado beetles in Russia, is due to foreign delivery,” resurrecting the canard from the East German, Polish, and Czechoslovakian propaganda campaigns of the 1950s. He did so despite public ridicule of the potato-beetle disinformation campaign in those countries after 1990 and the toppling of their Communist governments.<sup>35</sup> Even in late 2001, Yevstigneev was still repeating the potato-beetle story: “We are suspicious about mass emergence of Colorado beetles in Russia, known for damaging potatoes.”<sup>36</sup> In 1998, Lieutenant General Stanislav V. Petrov, head of all Russian Army chemical and biological troops, resurrected the charge that the United States had “experimented with” BW during the Korean War. Moscow NTV correspondent Maryana Maksimovskaya helped him along by adding that “the Americans blundered two years ago” when there was a hantavirus disease outbreak “near the Dugway test site in the USA where chemical and biological weapons used to be tested.” She also said, falsely, that hantaviruses and the Ebola virus “are very similar ... This made biologists suspect that the Ebola virus ... is not natural.”<sup>37</sup>

In a peculiar evolution, a book published in 2005 by Alexander Kouzminov, a former Soviet KGB agent who had emigrated from Russia to New Zealand, continued this tradition. According to the author, “almost every outbreak of a new or emerging infectious disease in the past 15 years—including the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Britain in 2001 and the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) pandemic in 2003—may have been either a deliberate bioweapons attack or an accidental release of a genetically engineered microbe from a bioweapons facility.” He also implied that “the causative agents of hantavirus pulmonary syndrome were genetically engineered specifically to attack Native Americans.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> For additional details, see Leitenberg and Zilinskas, *The Soviet Biological Weapons Program*, pp. 417–21. Paragraphs below are adapted from these pages.

<sup>34</sup> Sergei Gerasimenko, “Everything That They Are Saying About US Is a Lie,” *New Izvestia*, March 3, 1998.

<sup>35</sup> Dmitry Litovkin, “Interview; Valentin Yevstigneev on Issues Relating to Russian Biological Weapons,” *Yaderny Kontrol* [Nuclear control], No. 11 (1999), pp. 43–51 in the English-language edition, pp. 15–25 in the Russian-language edition.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with General Valentin Yevstigneev, “Biological Weapons Are the Cheapest Kind of WMD: An Interview” (in Russian), Moscow, November 26, 2001.

<sup>37</sup> BBC SWB (Summary of the World Broadcasts), “Russia: Military Bacteriological Centre Short of Funds, (Transmission of Moscow NTV, November 22, 1995),” November 27, 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Jens H. Kuhn, Milton Leitenberg, and Raymond Zilinskas, “Russia’s Secret Weapons,” a review of *Biological Espionage: Special Operations of the Soviet and Russian Foreign Intelligence Services in the West*, by Alexander Kouzminov, *Nature*, No. 436 (2005), pp. 628–29. At the time of publication of his book, Kouzminov was employed in a New Zealand government agency concerned with environmental affairs.

These claims were in perfect alignment with past Soviet BW disinformation; similar examples would follow. It is difficult to imagine or to comprehend the degree of brazen lying that Russian government officials and proxy disinformation sites produced during these years without reading the detailed record. Future historians will be justified in comparing the Russian BW disinformation campaign to the products of Joseph Goebbels's Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda during the Nazi era in Germany between 1933 and 1945. (For an extensive catalogue of examples of Russian BW disinformation, consult the supplement to this article.)

Most recently, COVID-19 has proved irresistible to Russian agencies as a topic of disinformation. The very first reference to SARS-CoV-2 being a US-made BW appeared on January 20, 2020, on tvzvezda.ru, a Russian government-owned platform operated by the Russian Ministry of Defense.<sup>39</sup> This was followed on January 22 by a report that the coronavirus was “likely elaborated in NATO biolabs.”<sup>40</sup> Between January 24 and January 27, at least eight Russian publications or platforms carried particularly inane coronavirus disinformation stories.<sup>41</sup> These were followed by many hundreds more, examples of which appear in the supplement.

A frequent target of Russian disinformation has been US support for the transformation of former Soviet BW facilities in the CIS under the Nunn–Lugar CTR program. In December 2009, an item in *Pravda* specifically targeted Georgia and the Lugar Center, built there under the Nunn–Lugar program. It claimed that “biological weapons are being secretly developed on Georgian territory,” and also referred to “the ‘plague project’ in Georgia.” The *Pravda* article contained no fewer than nine discrete false allegations and ended with the incredible charge that “[i]t is believed that the Americans are trying to deliver the specimens of biological weapons that have been obtained [in Georgia] to Iran.”<sup>42</sup> The Lugar Center would become a favorite target of dozens of additional Russian BW disinformation postings, some of which were extremely elaborate and made use of US documentation of its pre-1969 BW program.

In a departure from Soviet-style practices, official Russian government sources also began openly pointing fingers at these facilities. For example, in July 2013, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) responded to the US Department of State's annual noncompliance statement, particularly the section on Russian presumptive noncompliance with the BWC. It leveled accusations of its own, including a relatively innocuous comment that “Biological operations of the U.S. Dept. of Defense near the Russian borders are a source of very serious concerns as well,” which would subsequently be extravagantly and falsely elaborated in dozens of BW disinformation releases.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Semantic Visions, “Russia Leading from Behind: Coronavirus-Focused Case Study of Cross-Border Disinformation Spread,” March 27, 2020, <<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/a-new-chinese-coronavirus-was-likely-elaborated-in-nato-biolabs/>>.

<sup>40</sup> EU vs DISINFO, “DISINFO: A New Chinese Coronavirus Was Likely Elaborated in NATO Biolabs,” May 14, 2020, <<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/a-new-chinese-coronavirus-was-likely-elaborated-in-nato-biolabs/>>.

<sup>41</sup> *Polygraph.info*, “Russian Media Spew US Coronavirus Conspiracy for Domestic Audience,” January 28, 2020, <[www.polygraph.info/a/russia-coronavirus-conspiracy-fact-check/30402622.html](http://www.polygraph.info/a/russia-coronavirus-conspiracy-fact-check/30402622.html)>.

<sup>42</sup> Igor Makarov, “A Biological Bomb at Our Borders: Dangerous Experiments in Secret Georgian Laboratories Equipped by American Specialists,” *Pravda*, December 3, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Interfax–AVN Online, “Moscow Suggests US State Dept Report Authors ‘Look in the Mirror,’” July 19, 2013.

## Assessing the revival of Russian BW disinformation

The freedom of action that President Vladimir Putin has accorded to the Russian intelligence services since 1999 appears to have played a crucial role in their efforts to churn out disinformation, including about BW. It is unclear whether any foreign governments, either states parties to the BWC or others, believe any of it. Nor is it known whether the producers of the Russian BW disinformation even intend it to persuade foreign governments.

An observation that remains applicable is one that Dr. Matthew Meselson frequently used in the late 1960s and that was adopted as a principle during the writing of the set of six volumes on chemical and biological warfare published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute between 1969 and 1973.<sup>44</sup> Meselson observed that the worst possible event would be a true allegation of BW use by a state (and, since 1975, particularly a state party to the BWC). The next worst thing was a *false* allegation of BW use. Such an allegation would suggest that a state party is violating the BWC with impunity. It would also imply that BW have utility and are desirable for states to possess.

Filippa Lentzos has repeatedly invoked Meselson's dictum. Referring to dozens of Russian disinformation claims that US BW facilities were located all over the world, and in the Lugar Center in Georgia in particular, Lentzos wrote, "By claiming that biological weapon labs exist where they do not, Russia is hastening the death of that taboo—creating the appearance that reliance on these weapons is greater than it actually is, possibly encouraging other nations to pursue them."<sup>45</sup>

A variety of international political actors have picked up the latest Russian disinformation theme, i.e., that the SARS-CoV-2 pathogen was a US BW development, including Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, Indian MP and spokesman for the Congress Party Manesh Tewari, and Commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Hossein Salami—followed by Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei. A 2020 article highlighted Lentzos's complaint that

the parade of prominent figures promoting the bioweapons conspiracy theory could weaken the global taboo against possessing bioweapons—making biological weapon research appear to be widespread. "It's being pushed at senior political levels, most prominently from Iran, but also from Russia and to some extents China," she said. "It's important we call this out. We can't afford to have it seem like states have bioweapons and are getting away with it, or even that states would want to pursue these sorts of weapons. It significantly degrades the taboo against biological weapons."<sup>46</sup>

Two key questions arise. The more important is, who orders and directs the Russian BW disinformation campaigns? The answer to that question unfortunately will require public testimony that so far remains unavailable. The numerous books that have been written about Putin's administration do not examine this subject. However, Vladislav Surkov, a former senior official in Putin's Kremlin Secretariat, reportedly has been instrumental

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<sup>44</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *The Problem of Chemical and Biological Warfare*, Vols. 1–6 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1971–83).

<sup>45</sup> Filippa Lentzos, "The Russian Disinformation Attack that Poses a Biological Danger," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 10, 2018, <<https://thebulletin.org/2018/11/the-russian-disinformation-attack-that-poses-a-biological-danger/#>>.

<sup>46</sup> Matt Field and John Krzyzaniak, "Why Do Politicians Keep Breathing Life into the False Conspiracy Theory that the Coronavirus Is a Biological Weapon?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 19, 2020, <<https://thebulletin.org/2020/03/why-do-politicians-keep-breathing-life-into-the-false-conspiracy-theory-that-the-coronavirus-is-a-bioweapon/>>.

in organizing the Russian government's disinformation campaigns, including those concerning BW disinformation.<sup>47</sup> The second question is how hundreds of disinformation stories are concocted. Two bits of testimony have become available that shed at least a little light on this second question. One concerns the Russian MFA and the SVR office that inherited the functions of the USA Section of the Soviet KGB's First Chief Directorate. The organizational structure of this unit appears to have been modified in the past decade because of the Russian government's additional use of quasi-governmental organizations such as Yevgeny Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg.

A long-time official of the Russian MFA has mentioned in a conversation that, as part of his responsibilities several years ago, he was asked to provide some narratives that could be used for disinformation.<sup>48</sup> He was presumably not the only MFA official to whom such a request would have been made, but one cannot guess how widespread the practice is within the MFA.

Another source concerns the role of the intelligence services. The *New York Times* produced a short documentary based on their print reporting of the Soviet 1985–87 AIDS disinformation story. The following exchange appears during the seventh minute of the film:

*Narrator:* "Every KGB agent is required to spend 25% of their time coming up with ideas for fake stories. And in a year-end review—yes, the KGB had year-end reviews, too—everyone was evaluated on—"

*Ladislav Bittman* [former Czechoslovakian intelligence agent and diplomat] "... how many proposals for disinformation operations he submitted."<sup>49</sup>

It seems reasonable to assume that Bittman's testimony would apply to intelligence officers serving in the USA Section and not to "every [KGB] agent." The drawback to this information is that it pertains to 1987 and the Soviet era. However, practices in these agencies are very resistant to change, despite the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991. It is plausible to assume that similar practices have been followed since Putin took office, especially with the massive increase in Russian-government disinformation of all kinds.

Until the COVID-19 disinformation campaign that began in January 2020, the Russian government's BW-related disinformation was overwhelmingly directed at its own population and secondarily, through proxy outlets in Georgia, at the pro-Russian portion of the Georgian population. There is no survey or polling information of the Russian population and only one survey from Georgia to tell us what portion of the Georgian public accepts the fake stories.<sup>50</sup>

The false BW information was also released in Armenia, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine, as well as by Hamas in the Middle East, and minimally in Africa. Again, we have little idea

<sup>47</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, "How Vladislav Surkov Invented the New Russia," *The Atlantic*, November 7, 2014, <[www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/11/hidden-author-putinism-russia-vladislav-surkov/382489/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/11/hidden-author-putinism-russia-vladislav-surkov/382489/)>. Kramer, personal communication.

<sup>48</sup> Personal communications, March 6 and March 9, 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Adam B. Ellick, Adam Westbrook, and Jonah M. Kessel, "Meet the KGB Spies Who Invented Fake News: Operation Infektion," *New York Times*, November 12, 2018, <[www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/10000006210828/russia-disinformation-fake-news.html](http://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/10000006210828/russia-disinformation-fake-news.html)>.

<sup>50</sup> Caucasian Research Resource Center, "NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia," April 2019, <<https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/na2019ge/downloads/>>.

to what degree the disinformation has made inroads among any of these populations. With the initiation of the 2020 Russian coronavirus disinformation campaign, Russian platforms, particularly Sputnik, have targeted Spanish-speaking Latin America. In addition, Russian platforms have distributed a very substantial fraction of their coronavirus disinformation to an Arab-language audience. Given the phenomenal success of the Soviet 1980s AIDS campaign on public opinion across Africa, as well as among the African-American population in the United States, one should not underestimate the potential for the new wave of Russian-government BW-related disinformation to be found convincing to more people than one might imagine. Acceptance of disinformation concerning the Ebola outbreaks in Africa over the past 10 years has been widespread, both the kind that is deliberately introduced by a remote actor and that which appears impromptu in the locally affected population. However, statistical survey information is again unavailable (or at least unknown to this author). An epidemiologist who was involved in the Ebola-control efforts in Africa wrote,

Sadly, these conspiracies were taken all-too-seriously on the ground in West Africa, hampering public health efforts throughout the outbreak. The stories were often repeated in the local press, and they played into the widespread distrust of government following so many years of civil war in Liberia and Sierra Leone. In some cases, the bogeyman was “The Rothschilds” and other “shadowy international bankers who control the US and Europe.” Last year, these narratives were fringe; today, more and more mainstream.<sup>51</sup>

As a well-known aphorism says, “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.” The Korean War BW disinformation was probably accepted by a substantial portion of the Soviet, Chinese, and East European populations in 1951–53, and the Soviet disinformation campaigns in India and Pakistan in the 1970s achieved their aims on their intended targets, the Indian and Pakistani governments. The disinformation was probably also reasonably widely accepted by the public in both countries.

It appears unlikely that BWC states parties are receptive to Russian disinformation. One Russian scientist commented that all of the Russian coronavirus and BW disinformation was of no consequence; he and his academic colleagues paid no attention to it and therefore felt that its significance should not be exaggerated.<sup>52</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, an expert on BW arms control suggested that requesting a meeting of BWC states parties under the provisions of the formal consultative mechanism of the BWC might force the nations that disseminate disinformation to end these practices.<sup>53</sup>

If other BWC states parties believed the Russian disinformation, it could theoretically prompt some fraction of them to initiate offensive BW programs. Has it had such an effect? We do not know, but it seems unlikely. Do policy makers and defense officials in all BWC states parties understand that all these allegations are lies and fabricated disinformation, even possibly the few (Cuba, Iran, and two or three others) that give them lip service? Again, we do not know. But assumedly they do not believe the Russian

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<sup>51</sup> Personal communication, October 26, 2019. The reference to “Rothschilds” and “international bankers who control the US and Europe” is taken from one of the most successful disinformation projects ever conceived, the fabricated anti-Semitic “Protocols of the Elders of Zion.” In 2020, Russian COVID-19-related disinformation repeatedly used the same theme, replacing “the Rothschilds” with a more contemporary figure, George Soros.

<sup>52</sup> Personal communications, February 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Personal communication, March 18, 2020.

disinformation. Nevertheless, even if false BW allegations haven't done great damage yet, they certainly are undesirable. In addition to the Chinese, Indian, and Iranian examples noted earlier, an example is available of an international diplomat making use of the Russian BW disinformation in a significant manner. A former Pakistani minister of the interior, Rehman Malik, released a public letter to the United Nations secretary-general, Antonio Guterres, in April 2020. According to an account in *The News International*, a Pakistani newspaper, Malik asked Guterres to “order the constitution of a high-powered UN Commission on COVID-19 under [the] UN Convention on Biological Weapons, 1975 to discover whether COVID-19 is man-made or a naturally-grown virus.”<sup>54</sup> Since virologists had been “unsuccessful in accurately identifying source, locale, genesis, and variable results among affected states, the plausibility of some sort of Bio-Warfare within the Fifth Dimension Warfare is gaining root... ‘as the Bio-Warfare theories gain root in societies across the globe, in my considered view, it is essential that a high-powered Commission be constituted to ascertain the actual facts.’” Did Malik truly believe what his lines suggest, or was there some other motive for his public statement? No one can say; one only knows that he released the letter.

The EUvsDisInfo platform, the Georgian MythDetector, and the Atlantic Council's disinformation-debunking program certainly indicate that Russian BW disinformation is not a trivial concern.<sup>55</sup> One study published in March 2020 examined the state-affiliated COVID-19 disinformation campaigns carried out by Russia, China, and Iran. It asked three questions:

- How do the disinformation campaigns propagate?
- How are other governments or stakeholders reacting to them?
- What is the general public's reaction?

It discovered that the Chinese government had used bots to disseminate disinformation and that Global Research, a platform associated with Russian intelligence agencies, also used bots for the same purpose. But, most importantly, the study drew its conclusions from a computer-derived construct that measured “impressions,” the number of times that a particular message appeared on the computer screen of some person somewhere in the world. The study used this measure because digital search systems make it possible to obtain that number. For example, one early and significant Chinese Foreign Ministry posting alleging that the US Army was responsible for the virus causing COVID-19 reached almost 105 million “impressions” in just four days. (There is no information about what the 105 million users of the computer screens did with the message, whether it was read, or whether it was believed.) The study's author also noted that “Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites claim that they cannot find evidence of a deliberate Russian disinformation campaign” concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. The supplementary material accompanying this study, of course, makes such a statement ludicrous.<sup>56</sup> On April 2, 2020, the European Union

<sup>54</sup> Asim Yasin, “Rehman Malik urges UNSG to constitute commission on COVID-19,” *The News International*, April 4, 2020, <<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/639212-malik-urges-ung-to-constitute-commission-on-covid-19>>.

<sup>55</sup> These programs and platforms can be found, respectively, at <<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>>, <[www.mythdetector.ge/en](http://www.mythdetector.ge/en)>, and <[www.atlanticcouncil.org/issue/disinformation/](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/issue/disinformation/)>.

<sup>56</sup> Doowan Lee, “The Infodemic of COVID-19: Viral Influence Competition,” Signal Labs, March 18, 2020.

funded a new initiative devoted solely to debunking coronavirus disinformation, to be coordinated by a consortium of 11 European nongovernmental actors.<sup>57</sup>

The Russian government approach is consistent with what a 2016 RAND report describes as the “firehose of falsehood” propaganda model.<sup>58</sup> Its major features are that it is (1) high-volume and multichannel; (2) rapid, continuous, and repetitive; (3) lacking commitment to objective reality; and (4) lacking commitment to consistency.<sup>59</sup> Regardless of the topic, it appears to be immaterial whether the multiple Russian disinformation releases are mutually contradictory. It also appears to make no difference whether the various disinformation stories are immediately disprovable, or even patently ridiculous. Other studies provided corollary conclusions: an EU analysis describes the style of conflicting Russian disinformation messages as intended simply to produce confusion;<sup>60</sup> another EU study described the Russian coronavirus disinformation program as being “characteristic of the Kremlin’s well-established strategy of using disinformation to amplify divisions, sow distrust and chaos and exacerbate crisis situations and issues of public concern.”<sup>61</sup>

## Concerns about Russia’s BWC compliance

An important part of the context for Russian disinformation about BW is the question of Moscow’s own attitude toward compliance with the BWC. In a somewhat bizarre development in February and March 2012, President Putin and Russian Minister of Defense Anatoly Serdyukov publicly referred to 28 tasks that Putin had established for the Ministry of Defense (MOD) “to prepare for threats of the future.” Putin wrote that Russia needed to be prepared for “quick and effective responses to new challenges.” Task #4 was “The development of weapons based on new physical principles: radiation, geophysical, wave, genetic, psychophysical, etc.”<sup>62</sup>

The “genetic” weapons in President Putin’s 2012 remarks would obviously be forbidden by the BWC, and the remainder of his wish list—“weapons based on new physical principles: radiation, geophysical, wave, psychophysical”—are an arms-control nightmare. “Geophysical” weapons would explicitly contravene the 1977 Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Technologies (ENMOD). ENMOD was a multilateral arms-control treaty that was

<sup>57</sup> Open University, “Emergency Funding to Track the Spread of False Information about COVID-19,” n.d., <[www.open.ac.uk/research/news/emergency-funding-track-spread-false-information-about-covid-19](http://www.open.ac.uk/research/news/emergency-funding-track-spread-false-information-about-covid-19)>.

<sup>58</sup> Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It,” PE-198-OSD [2016], <[www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE198/RAND\\_PE198.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE198/RAND_PE198.pdf)>.

<sup>59</sup> It is worth noting that social media and the wider digital space provide a megaphone to amplify the lies and fabrications. This technology lends itself to this sort of campaign of lies and deceit.

<sup>60</sup> EU vs DiSiNFO, “The Kremlin and Disinformation about Coronavirus,” March 16, 2020, <<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-kremlin-and-disinformation-about-coronavirus/>>. Boris Nemtsov’s widow reduced the purpose still further, “to maintain Putin in power.” EU vs DiSiNFO, “Consequences of Disinformation,” No. 185, February 27, 2020, <<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/consequences-of-disinformation/>>.

<sup>61</sup> EU vs Disinfo, “EEAS Special Report: Disinformation on the Coronavirus—Short Assessment of the Information Environment,” March 19, 2020, <<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-disinformation-on-the-coronavirus-short-assessment-of-the-information-environment/>>.

<sup>62</sup> David Hoffman, “Genetic Weapons, You Say?” *Foreign Policy*, March 27, 2012, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/03/27/genetic-weapons-you-say/>>, in reference to an essay by Putin published in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, February 20 2102, and a transcript of a meeting of Putin with his cabinet ministers on March 22, 2012.

championed by the Soviet Union under the Leonid Brezhnev administration and entered into force on October 5, 1978.

Within a month, by April 4, 2012, Putin's "Task #4" had been removed from the Russian government websites where it had previously appeared.<sup>63</sup>

In May 2014, this author and others testified to a US congressional subcommittee on the subject of the BW program of the Soviet Union. My own testimony took particular note of the Putin–Serdyukov material from 2012.<sup>64</sup> This prompted a response from Russian government agencies, including a statement from the Russian MFA. It stated that the US congressional hearing had been a "propagandistic event," based on "conjecture," and that those who testified were "representatives of the US establishment." Most importantly, the Russian MFA statement said that

the content of the programme article by the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, "To be strong: national security guarantees for Russia", which was published in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* on 17 February 2012, was grossly distorted at the hearings. The part related to scientific and technical achievements and their influence on means and methods of armed fight expressed Russia's concerns that foreign countries can use such achievements for the creation and use of new types of weapons, in particular, generic [sic] weapons. This thought was "turned upside down" at the hearings in Congress and was presented as Russia's aspiration to create new types of biological weapons. We decisively reject such considerations as absolutely false.<sup>65</sup>

The MFA statement is ridiculous. In Putin's long presentation in the Russian press in February 2012 as part of his presidential election campaign, and in his TV appearance handing the assigned "tasks" to Serdyukov on March 22, 2012, Putin was certainly not talking about any "other countries." In addition, in his televised immediate response to Putin, Serdyukov promised that, by 2020, the MOD would have completed development of the requested new weapons.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusions

Why does the Russian government carry on the BW disinformation campaigns?

The first purpose is to accuse the United States of violating the BWC by continuing a BW program. This has been the Russian government's response to the annual US compliance reports regarding the indeterminate status of the Russian offensive BW program. It recalls Russia's practices during the final years of the US–UK–Soviet Trilateral negotiations in 1994–96, when Russia sought to deflect concerns about the absence of any evidence that it had ended the Soviet offensive BW program. It sought to deflect its own

<sup>63</sup> Raymond Zilinskas, "Take Russia to 'Task' on Bioweapons Transparency," *Nature Medicine*, Vol. 18, No. 6 (2012), p. 850.

<sup>64</sup> Milton Leitenberg, "The Biological Weapons Program of the Soviet Union," in *Assessing the Biological Weapons Threat: Russia and Beyond*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Serial No. 113–142, May 7, 2014 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2014).

<sup>65</sup> MFA Russian Federation, "Comment by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Regarding the Distortion of Russia's Position on BWC Issues by the US Congress," May 12, 2014, <[www.mid.ru/kommentarii\\_predstavitelya/-/asset\\_publisher/](http://www.mid.ru/kommentarii_predstavitelya/-/asset_publisher/)>. See also Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Russia Rejects Bioweapons Talk in US Congress as 'Propaganda,'" May 13, 2014, <[www.nti.org/gsn/article/bioweapons-claims-prompt-russian-rebuke/](http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/bioweapons-claims-prompt-russian-rebuke/)>.

<sup>66</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Being Strong: National Security Guarantees for Russia," *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, February 20, 2012, <<https://rg.ru/2012/02/20/putin-armiya.html>>, and a transcript of a meeting of Putin with his cabinet ministers on March 22, 2012.



possible BWC noncompliance by making counteraccusations.<sup>67</sup> In 1991, when Gorbachev was still in office, an arrangement was agreed to under which Russian scientists visited US and UK BW-related facilities, both military and civilian, and US and UK scientists visited only nominally civilian BW-related facilities in the Soviet Union. Another exchange of visits took place in 1993. But negotiations between 1993 and 1996, under which US and UK scientists would be allowed to visit the three Russian MOD BW-related institutes, were stymied by Russian-government intransigence. This has evolved into successive Russian disinformation claims that the United States has 19, 23, 40, 200, or 400 military BW facilities around the world. The 200 and 400 are nonsensical; nevertheless, they became a staple of Russian BW-related misinformation in more recent years. There are not (and have never been) even 30 facilities globally where researchers affiliated with the US military have carried out research that can be considered to relate to biodefense.

A second purpose is to attack Georgia, particularly in the years after the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia and the Russian annexation of two segments of Georgia's territory, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Implicitly, Moscow aims to weaken US–Georgian relations, and to weaken US relations with any other former Soviet state hosting a CTR facility. Russia seeks to end US support for and US research presence in all the CTR facilities in the CIS states on Russia's periphery. Russia seeks to achieve what the Soviet Union succeeded in doing in Pakistan in 1982.

Finally, many commentators have suggested that the Russian government is carrying on its BW disinformation campaigns to divert international attention from its own actions or those of its proxies.<sup>68</sup> These include the 2006 assassination of Alexander Litvinenko and then the 2018 attempt to do the same to Sergei Skripal, both in the United Kingdom; the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the continued propagation of the war there; the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Civil War; and the Russian government's efforts to shield Damascus from any consequences in international forums of Syrian-government use of chemical weapons.

Finally, what does all the preceding tell us about the Russian government, specifically the Putin administration and its attitude toward the BWC? It is clear that the Russian BW-related allegations are lies. It would be bad enough if a government made such accusations because of a mistaken assessment—that is, not deliberately but in error. That a state should make such false allegations as deliberate disinformation for the sake of short-term political gains for 30 years, under the Soviet Union, and then reinitiate the practice, under the Russian government, for another 15 years from 2006 to the present is unconscionable. There is also a major difference under Putin: Russian-government practice is no longer to plant items in obscure media outlets abroad. Now, some of the most senior officials in the Russian government deliver the disinformation: the head of the Russian National Security Council, the foreign minister, and the MFA spokesperson.

The Russian government's BW-disinformation program is brazen in character, and exhibits open disdain for the BWC. For example, the Russian government is fully

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<sup>67</sup> The Trilateral negotiations are discussed in detail in Leitenberg and Zilinskas, *The Soviet Biological Weapons Program*, pp. 562–678.

<sup>68</sup> For example, Elizabeth Read, US deputy chief of mission in Georgia, in Steve Rosenberg, "Russian Disinformation and the Georgian 'Lab of Death,'" BBC, November 12, 2018, <[www.bbc.com/news/av/world-46157507/russian-disinformation-and-the-georgian-lab-of-death](http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-46157507/russian-disinformation-and-the-georgian-lab-of-death)>.

aware of the benign nature of the public-health activities at the Lugar Center in Georgia, one of its primary targets in recent years. (See the supplement to this article for additional details.) Nine Russian scientists have visited the facility since 2016, several of these nine having worked there.<sup>69</sup> From an epidemiological perspective, the Lugar Center in Georgia benefits Russian public health. Nevertheless, in late spring 2020, the Russian MFA once again released gross disinformation about the Lugar Center. On May 26, 2020, it released a three-page statement containing no fewer than 16 false statements pertaining to the center, nearly all of them disproved long ago.<sup>70</sup> The Russian MFA ended its statement with a demand for a visit by Russian experts while no one else was present, including international representatives from the World Health Organization or the United Nations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia responded the following day,<sup>71</sup> which prompted a second Russian MFA statement that added nine new false statements.<sup>72</sup>

A month earlier, Russian MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova had repeated her more general refrain: “We cannot rule out that the Americans use such reference laboratories in third countries to develop and modify various pathogenic agents, including in military purposes.” In reporting on her remarks, the TASS news agency referred to the Lugar Center as “an official part of the US military system of global infectious diseases control,” and said that, “according to recent reports, top-ranking Pentagon officials have recently visited it to offer the Georgian authorities to expand the range of research.” Zakharova continued, “Naturally we cannot ignore the fact that the Americans are developing an infrastructure with hazardous biological potential in the direct proximity to the Russian borders.”<sup>73</sup>

Much more significantly than a relatively mild statement by the MFA spokesperson, the most senior representatives of the Russian government are pushing a false narrative on the diplomatic level directly to other countries. On September 15, 2020, Nikolai Patrushev, Putin’s deputy and secretary of the Russian Security Council, told his colleagues in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—which includes China, India, and Pakistan—that “American specialists are ‘actively studying the resistance of health system to infectious diseases, their treatment and prevention’ ... [They are] engaged in ‘collecting biological data’ ... ‘the resulting strains of pathogens of local infections can be used to create biological weapons that can selectively affect individual ethnic groups.’”<sup>74</sup> Patrushev’s remarks were not novel; he had been accusing the United States of carrying out BW activities against Russia since 2007 when he was still the head of the Russian FSB. However, it was significant that he was making these remarks directly to ministerial-level officials of SCO member states.

<sup>69</sup> Dr. Paata Imnadze, director of the Lugar Center, personal communication, July 12, 2019.

<sup>70</sup> MFA Russian Federation, “Comment by the Information and Press Department on developments involving the Richard Lugar Centre for Public Health Research in Georgia,” 803-26-05-2020, May 26, 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, “Commentary of the Press and Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the statement of the Russian Federation Regarding the Lugar Center,” May 27, 2020.

<sup>72</sup> MFA Russian Federation, “Comment by the Information and Press Department on the Georgian Foreign Ministry’s response apropos of the Richard Lugar Centre for Public Health Research,” 812-27-05-2020, May 27, 2020.

<sup>73</sup> TASS, “US Labs in Third Countries May Be Developing Pathogenic Agents—Diplomat,” April 17, 2020, <<https://tass.com/politics/1146327>>.

<sup>74</sup> *Kommersant*, “Nikolai Patrushev Warned His SCO Colleagues about Threats from the West,” September 15, 2020, <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/4492764](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4492764)>. The other states that belong to the SCO are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

The Putin administration evinces little interest in upholding the integrity of the BWC. It is willing to spend years making hundreds of false allegations regarding BW despite (or because of) its own ambiguous compliance with the BWC, and to undermine the Georgian government. This trend bodes ill for BW and arms control, since it suggests that Russia has little serious interest in the treaty or its maintenance. And, as in decades past, the false allegations may serve as a cover for a Russian offensive BW program. There is insufficient public evidence to support this fear, but the issue is implicit in each successive US noncompliance statement since the mid-1990s. The cynicism evident in the official Russian attitude toward the BWC offers little reassurance.

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## Supplementary material

The supplementary materials to this article, available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2021.1964755>, contain a detailed chronology from 1998 to mid-2021 of BW-related disinformation emanating from Russian government agencies or their proxies: senior officials in the Russian Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense; public-health agencies; and a multitude of media platforms, including many evidently established for this purpose by Russian intelligence agencies. These false allegations include claims that the United States had maintained an offensive BW program, carried out in laboratories all over the world, but particularly in facilities established in former Soviet states surrounding Russia, notably Georgia, and that from these locations the United States was actively attacking Russia with a long list of pathogens. All of these allegations are false, and there can be little question that the Russian government knows that they are false. Most of these facilities had been connected to the Soviet offensive BW program, and were later converted with the support of the Nunn-Lugar program to serve as central public-health laboratories, analogous to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States.