

America's Countering Soviet Disinformation in the 1980s

Prof. Nicholas J. Cull

In the 1980s President Reagan's America faced a deluge of Soviet disinformation including the libellous claim that AIDS was a US bioweapon gone wrong. Seeing a threat to its reputational security, it responded through careful tracking and counter-messaging, but its best response proved to be diplomatic. US diplomats persuaded the Soviet Union that its interests would be best served by ensuring the integrity of information and a mutually beneficial relationship with the USA, and the crisis passed.

The challenge: a tide of lies

Disinformation was an old tactic of the Bolsheviks and of the Tsar's forces before them. It figured in the toolbox of the Soviet state throughout the [Cold War](#). By the 1980s it became clear that disinformation had become the central communication challenge to the US. Washington noticed a growing number of false and planted news stories and malicious rumours circulating globally. The key element in the campaign was often the 'proof' offered in a fake document. The US government detected three or four Soviet fakes most years during the Cold War, but by the 1980s they were a monthly occurrence. The disinformation stories of the 1980s were meticulously constructed often with multiple 'proofs', including faked documents, misleading photographs, tendentious technical papers and invented news stories, infiltrated into multiple platforms, including scientific journals, international newspapers, Soviet media such as TASS and Novosti, and passed on in confidential one-on-one meetings. In this regard they were not unlike the instantly created rumours of the social media era. Many Soviet disinformation stories concerned claims of intrigue by the CIA: involvement in assassinations; development of secret weapons; and so forth. The KGB claimed that the US was behind a terrorist attack in Mecca, had

murdered India's Mrs Gandhi, used biological weapons in Cuba and was running a trade in baby parts for transplant surgery. The most worrying disinformation story claimed that the newly identified disease – HIV/AIDS – had been developed in the biowarfare laboratory in Fort Dietrich, Maryland. Lack of knowledge about the new disease and an understandable fear of the unknown opened a fertile field in which the lie could take root and proliferate. Washington had to act.



← 'Panic in the West, or What Is behind the AIDS Sensation': an article in the Soviet weekly *Literaturnaja gazeta* of 30 October 1985, featuring photos of people with HIV/AIDS and a biological weapons laboratory in Fort Dietrich, Maryland.

➔ Caricature published in the newspaper *Pravda* on 31 October 1986. According to the Russians, the virus was created in the Pentagon's laboratories, with the participation of Nazi scientists (that is why there are swastikas in the test tube marked in the speech bubble as the 'AIDS virus').



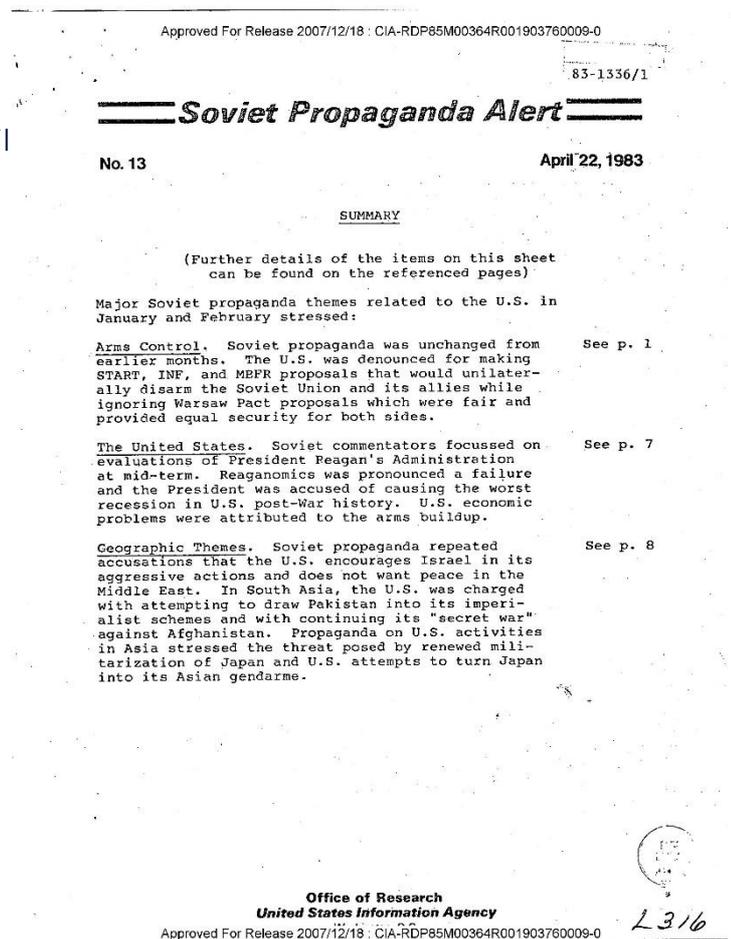
Pravda, 31.10.1986, p.5.

The response: sounding the alarm

The key agency in responding to Soviet disinformation was the United States Information Agency (USIA). This agency had been established in 1953 as a one-stop-shop through which the US government could engage the world. Its activities included Voice of America radio, films, exhibitions and embassy messaging. Ronald Reagan supported the agency, appointing his friend Charles Z. Wick as director and providing the resources necessary to push back. His support included allowing the agency to drop its Carter-era name of the United States International Communication Agency, which had not caught on. As always with public diplomacy, the effective response began with listening: tracking disinformation by theme and location. The USIA published a regular *Soviet Propaganda Alert* so all US diplomats and many others in government were aware of the problem and officials were equipped to rebut particular rumours.



Soviet Propaganda Alert of April 1983 published by the United States Information Agency.



Wick called his counter propaganda campaign Project Truth. Soon the USIA established its own counter-disinformation unit led by an energetic expert on communist tactics named Herbert Romerstein. The USIA joined other agencies including the CIA, the State Department and the FBI in an inter-agency task force called the Active Measures Working Group, chaired by a diplomat from the State Department. A string of detailed reports followed. Romerstein's insights included the value of speaking openly about the threat and sharing fakes designed for one region of the world in another. The clumsy stories crafted by the KGB for the developing world when shared in Western Europe served to undermine Soviet credibility, especially when Romerstein presented them at press conferences with the energy more usually seen in a stand-up comedian. He made great capital from the Soviet claim that the US had a bomb that could kill blacks and leave whites alive, more especially when the same rumour was tried in a Middle East setting with a claim that the bomb could kill Arabs and leave Jews alive. Documents captured during the US invasion of the Caribbean island of Grenada helped. Inevitably the Soviets attempted to implicate Romerstein in a conspiracy with a fake letter. He was able to expose the subterfuge, point out that the signature used in the letter was copied from a uniquely marked one on a note he had shared, as a courtesy, with the Czechoslovak Embassy in Washington DC. By the end of the decade the USIA was leading classes for journalists around the world to raise their awareness about the challenge of disinformation and help them anticipate and reject faked documentary evidence.

The diplomatic approach: media disarmament

The toughest challenge was that concerning the AIDS story. The US worked to publicize the facts of the illness as far as they were known. In the end what really helped was the direct negotiation between the US and the USSR from the mid-1980s onwards. Just as the negotiations included discussion over nuclear weapons, so they included face-to-face talks over the conflict in the media. A series of information talks followed between representatives of the USIA and the Soviet propaganda bureaucracy. The meetings alternated between the US and the USSR. The US complained about disinformation and limits on US journalists working in the USSR,

and to their surprise the Soviet Union also complained about US disinformation, comparing Voice of America broadcasts about divisions within the Kremlin to the kind of Nazi news stories that they blamed for triggering the political purges of the 1930s. Neither side enjoyed the others penchant for media stereotyping and demonization. As the media disarmament process continued the two superpowers agreed to increase the facilities for journalists and even to create a 'hot line' for the easy correction of any mistakes in one another's media coverage. The negotiations included concern over the AIDS story. In a meeting in the summer of 1987 about medical and scientific exchange, a senior USIA official threatened to suspend scientific cooperation on AIDS research and possibly escalating this more broadly unless the disinformation ceased. The USSR issued the necessary promise. When, during a meeting in Washington DC in December 1987, Gorbachev was shown evidence of the continued use of the story, he insisted that he wanted 'a new day' without distortion on either side. The AIDS story receded as hoped.



↑ US President Ronald Reagan meeting Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev in the White House during the Washington summit of December 1987.

The USA's counter disinformation apparatus continued in service after the end of the Cold War. It played an important role in the 1st Gulf War of 1991, countering the extensive use of disinformation by the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein. Unfortunately, the US Senate fancied that the need for the USIA had ended with Cold War hostilities, and cut funding for the agency throughout the 1990s, culminating in its merger into the Department of State in 1999. Expertise in disinformation was lost along the way and had to be rebuilt following the terrorist attacks on America in 2001. Key lessons of the 1980s remain: listen, track, act, share, rebut, empower and negotiate as you would when faced with the use of any mutually damaging weapon. It is certainly a fallacy to assume that a communication challenge on the world stage can or should be met solely with a communication response.

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