

Unveiling the truth: how the United States fought Soviet disinformation during the Cold War

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Sources

Source A

[...] Historians have debated the motivations behind the Cold War conflict since before the conflict's end, arguing whether the USSR and U.S.'s strategic realist expansion or ideological commitment to Marxist communism and democratic capitalism fueled the conflict [...] Although realist motivations may have driven the expansion of Cold War intervention in some part, ideological tactics were used to advance U.S. and USSR interests both domestically and abroad. Both countries viewed the Cold War, at least in part, as an ideological conflict, and as a result, the multi-decade "war" was fought using discourse and tools to affect ideology [...]

Scholars of both historical and modern disinformation posit that conspiracy theories, smear campaigns, and similar disinformation located in the political discourse affords a sense of political drama that is accessible to wide portions of the informed public [...]. Examples of these campaigns are diverse and widespread, with their motivations still debated [...] The Soviet Union implemented disinformation campaigns both within its borders and internationally that painted émigrés from Latvia as Nazi war criminals [...].

As the Soviets blamed the U.S. for the AIDS epidemic on the African continent, the Reagan administration help spread stories of "booby-trapped" children's toys sold by the USSR to Afghanistan families [...]. The general use of disinformation, including the presence of conspiracy theories and rumors, were informed by the ideological currents of both the United States and the USSR. Although the extent to which each country sought interventions, covert or otherwise, varied throughout the decades of

conflict, the above disinformation campaign examples can be traced to overarching ideological competition between the USSR and the United States. [...]

While disinformation was a Cold War tactic, the birth of social media and the Internet have significantly changed the landscape for disinformation actors and those who contend with and combat them. [...]. It is undeniable that the scope of the disinformation problem today is different than the one faced in the Cold War era.

The pervasive presence of social media allows actors the means to spread rumors, propaganda, and false news without having to engage with gatekeepers such as the traditional media. Social media also allows the purveyors of disinformation to insert narratives directly into the personal and trusted networks that many use to understand political events [...].

The Internet itself and new capacity for massive data storage creates hypothetical sites of insecurity and breach—raising the possibility that state forces may access, weaponise, and disseminate private information [...] The threat of this alone can cause distrust in government institutions and digital storage protocols. These looming considerations make it difficult to differentiate between good and bad information, creating a climate where any news or material is concurrently both circumspect and potentially vital. [...]

Megan Ward, Shannon Pierson and Jessica Beyer, *Formative Battles: Cold War Disinformation Campaigns and Mitigation Strategies*, August 2019 [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars:

https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/cold_war_disinformation_campaign.pdf.

Source B

Evil Empire Speech by Ronald Reagan, March 8, 1983 Historical Note

On March 8, 1983, President Reagan delivered an address to a meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida. It referred to communism as "the focus of evil in the modern world," and quickly became known as his "Evil Empire Speech."

The speech was delivered at a time when Congress was debating a resolution in support of a "nuclear freeze," a doctrine supported by the Soviet Union that would

have prevented the deployment of U.S. cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe. [...] The speech was destined to go down in history as one of Reagan's most influential addresses. [...]

'Evil Empire Speech by Ronald Reagan', March 8, 1983 [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on Boston College:
https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/boisi/pdf/Symposia/Symposia%202011-2012/Regan_EvilEmpire.pdf.

Source C

Operation TARAANY (“cockroaches”)

A vast dark cloud of billions of buzzing mosquitoes swarms toward a distant city skyline. The lead mosquito’s legs are armored with spikes, its eyes and mouth so magnified they appear gigantic. At second glance, the creature’s mouth is not that of a normal mosquito, but an engineered, razor-sharp syringe. The swarm is emanating from the dark eye sockets of a human skull, a skull smoking a cigarette. This bizarre illustration appeared in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* on February 3, 1982, above a long story titled "Incubator of Death." The piece, written in the first person, was a kind of travelogue into a CIA factory for weaponised mosquitoes. The author, Iona Andronov, started his adventure after visiting the editor of “the journal ‘Covert Action’ in Washington,” (a reference to Covert Action Information Bulletin). That Washington editor showed Andronov, he claimed, “leaked documents from the CIA” that led his investigation to Lahore, Pakistan. En route from Moscow to Lahore, Andronov recounted, his luggage was taken away during a layover, then he was followed by Pakistani security, and diplomatic phone numbers appeared to mysteriously stop working. American spies were on his heels. Nevertheless, the intrepid reporter managed to charm his way into the secret mosquito lab.

Thomas Rid, *Active measures. The secret history of disinformation and political warfare*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 2020, p. 288 [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on Google Books: [https://books.google.pl/books?id=WIITDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT350&dq=A\[%E2%80%A6\]&pg=PT350#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.pl/books?id=WIITDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT350&dq=A[%E2%80%A6]&pg=PT350#v=onepage&q&f=false).



An illustration of U.S. biological weapons that did not exist, in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Moscow, February 1982 (*Literaturnaya Gazeta*)

[...] The killer mosquito story was part of a larger, more complex campaign to deflect blame and to compromise the U.S. and NATO over biological and chemical weapons. The campaign was code-named TARAKANY, "cockroaches" in Russian. Even if the Soviet claim that the CIA was developing chemical weapons in Lahore was revealed as fake, that revelation would make it easier for the USSR to claim that the CIA's reports of Soviet chemical weapons in Afghanistan were equally made-up. Just when the United States was getting ready to publish a major report on Soviet chemical weapons, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* alleged that the Pakistan Malaria Research Center was a CIA-funded laboratory to breed weaponised mosquitoes. The story was clumsy but creative. Iona Andronov depicted the Americans he met in the "mosquito factory" as cartoonish villains—fat, fiendish, crude, and cunning. The University of Maryland lab in Lahore and its fight against malaria, he claimed, was only a façade; behind it were "poisoners from overseas" who plotted to infect entire cattle herds with viruses and then take advantage of the seasonal migration of the herds from Pakistan to Afghanistan to start an epidemic of encephalitis in Afghanistan.

The Gazeta story also claimed that a recent outbreak of dengue fever in Cuba had been caused by imported Lahore-bred mosquitoes. TARAKANY replayed similar tales about U.S. killer germs in India, Iran, Bangladesh, Lebanon, and South Africa. The KGB considered its “cockroaches” campaign a big success, especially after Service A concluded that Pakistan had declared the American head of the University of Maryland lab in Lahore *persona non grata* as a result of their work. [...]

It was against this background of military escalation in Afghanistan and weapons of mass destruction in South Asia that one of the most infamous disinformation campaigns of the entire Cold War emerged: the story that AIDS was an American biological weapon developed at Fort Detrick, Maryland.

Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 2020, pp. 287–89. Available at Google Books: [https://books.google.pl/books?id=IWltDwAAQBAJ&lpg=PT350&dq=A\[%E2%80%A6\]&pg=PT350#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.pl/books?id=IWltDwAAQBAJ&lpg=PT350&dq=A[%E2%80%A6]&pg=PT350#v=onepage&q&f=false).

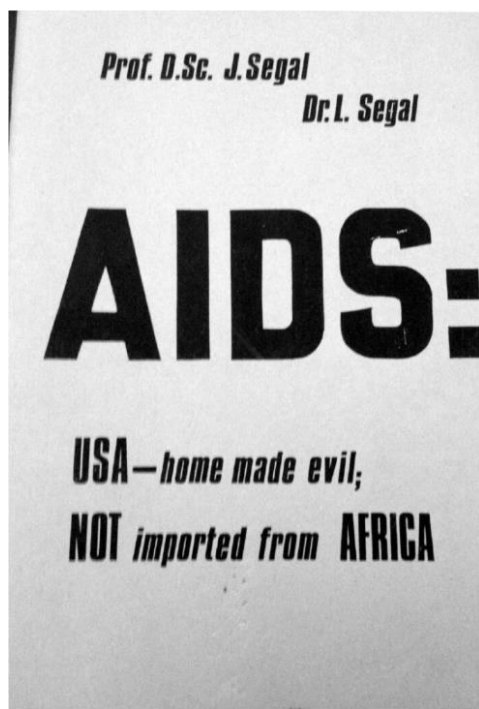
Source D

In September 1985, the Soviet State Security Committee (KGB) informed other Warsaw Pact foreign intelligence agencies that it had launched a new, major disinformation campaign. “We are carrying out a complex of [active] measures in connection with the appearance in recent years of a new dangerous disease in the USA known as AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome).” The KGB explained that “the goal of the measures is to create a favorable opinion for us abroad — namely, that this disease is the result of secret experiments by the USA’s secret services and the Pentagon with new types of biological weapons that have spun out of control.” Most likely, the KGB had initiated the disinformation campaign as early as 1983, but the September 1985 document — obtained by Christopher Nehring from the former Bulgarian State Security archive — is the earliest conclusive evidence that has turned up so far. (The former KGB foreign intelligence archive has never been accessible to researchers.) [...]

Among the East European intelligence services that assisted the KGB in this effort was the East German Ministry for State Security (Stasi), which used the codename “Denver” when referring to the campaign.

The KGB and Stasi relied on forged documents and inaccurate testimony from purported experts to suggest that HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, had originated not from infected animals in Africa but from biological warfare research carried out by U.S. military scientists at Fort Detrick in Maryland. Operation Denver proved remarkably effective [...] Before long, immense numbers of people around the world (including in the United States) came to believe, falsely, that the U.S. government was responsible for AIDS.

Mark Kramer, 'Lessons From Operation "Denver," the KGB's Massive AIDS Disinformation Campaign', 26 May 2020 [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on the MIT Press Reader: <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/brochure-700x1035.jpg>.



The Harare brochure.

Photograph by Douglas Selvage.

Although the brochure cites neither the year nor the place of publication, it provides the following information:

"published on the occasion of the VIII Non-Aligned Summit in Harare (Zimbabwe) in 1986." A copy of the brochure belonging to Douglas Selvage is on display at the German Spy Museum in Berlin.

Mark Kramer, 'Lessons From Operation "Denver," the KGB's Massive AIDS Disinformation Campaign', 26 May 2020 [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on the MIT Press Reader: <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/operation-denver-kgb-aids-disinformation-campaign/>.

Source E

[...] In August of 1987, the working group published its second annual report on Soviet Influence Activities: A Report on Active Measures and Propaganda, 1986–1987. This report, as well as a Foreign Affairs Note published the month before, focused on the Soviet disinformation campaign on AIDS. Both came out within a few months of a high-level U.S.-Soviet summit in Moscow, which some State officials found less than propitious. Gorbachev felt the same way. The working group's second annual report

was the one that Gorbachev complained about to Secretary Shultz and that received so much media attention as a result. Since Shultz did not back off when confronted, Gorbachev had no reason to believe the United States would desist from exposing Soviet disinformation. By implication, the United States would stop exposing Soviet lies only if the Soviets would stop telling them. Presumably, Gorbachev and the new generation of Soviet leadership forming around him were uncomfortable with the resultant negative public relations and diplomatic fallout. In November, a month after the summit, Soviet scientists disavowed the AIDS campaign in official Soviet media outlets, and soon thereafter, the Soviets agreed to cooperative measures to reduce the likelihood of inflammatory and inaccurate public media messages detrimental to U.S.-Soviet relations. [...]

Fletcher Schoen and Christopher J. Lamb, *Deception, Disinformation, and Strategic Communications: How One Interagency Group Made a Major Difference*, Institute for National Strategic Studies Strategic Perspectives, No. 11, June 2021, p. 63.

Source F

Short biography of Ronald Reagan

Ronald Wilson Reagan (February 6, 1911 – June 5, 2004) was an American politician who served as the 40th president of the United States from 1981 to 1989. Prior to his presidency, he was a Hollywood movie actor and union leader before serving as the 33rd governor of California from 1967 to 1975. [...]

Ronald Reagan [accessed 20 October 2022].
Available on Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronald_Reagan.

Reagan's militant anticommunism, combined with his penchant for harsh anti-Soviet rhetoric, was one of many factors that contributed to a worsening of relations with the Soviet Union in the first years of his presidency. [...] Reagan's massive military spending program, the largest in American peacetime history [...] was actually responsible for a host of positive developments in Reagan's second term, including a more accommodating Soviet position in arms negotiations, a weakening of the influence of hard-liners in the Soviet leadership, making possible the *glasnost* ("openness") and *perestroika* ("restructuring") policies of moderate Soviet leader

Mikhail Gorbachev after 1985, and even the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself in 1990–91.

A significant component of Reagan's military buildup was his 1983 proposal for a space-based missile defense system that would use lasers and other as-yet-undeveloped killing technologies to destroy incoming Soviet nuclear missiles well before they could reach their targets in the United States.

U.S.-Soviet relations improved considerably during Reagan's second term [...], not least because Reagan softened his anti-communist rhetoric and adopted a more encouraging tone toward the changes then taking place in the Soviet Union.

Relations with the Soviet Union of Ronald Reagan [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on Encyclopædia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ronald-Reagan/Relations-with-the-Soviet-Union>.

Source G

Short biography of Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev

[...] He was elected general secretary in 1985. He became the first president of the Soviet Union in 1990 and won the Nobel Prize for Peace that same year. He resigned in 1991 [...].

During his term as general secretary, Gorbachev was engaged with U.S. president Ronald Reagan in a costly race to amass nuclear weapons in space. The expense put further stress on the already suffering Soviet economy. Gorbachev worked diligently to create reforms that he believed would improve the Soviet standard of living. By providing more freedom and democracy to Soviets, he strove toward “glasnost” and “perestroika,” openness and restructuring. He worked toward establishing a market economy that was more socially oriented. Gorbachev's reforms were also geared toward increasing productivity and reducing waste. [...]

During his presidency, Gorbachev promoted more peaceful international relations. He ordered Soviet troops to withdraw from Afghanistan. Through his peaceful negotiations with President Reagan, Gorbachev was also instrumental in ending the Cold War. He is likewise credited for his crucial role in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification of Germany. For his excellent leadership and his

contributions to the overall betterment of world development, Gorbachev was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on October 15, 1990. [...]

Mikhail Gorbachev [accessed 20 October 2022].

Available on Biography.com: <https://www.biography.com/political-figure/mikhail-gorbachev>.