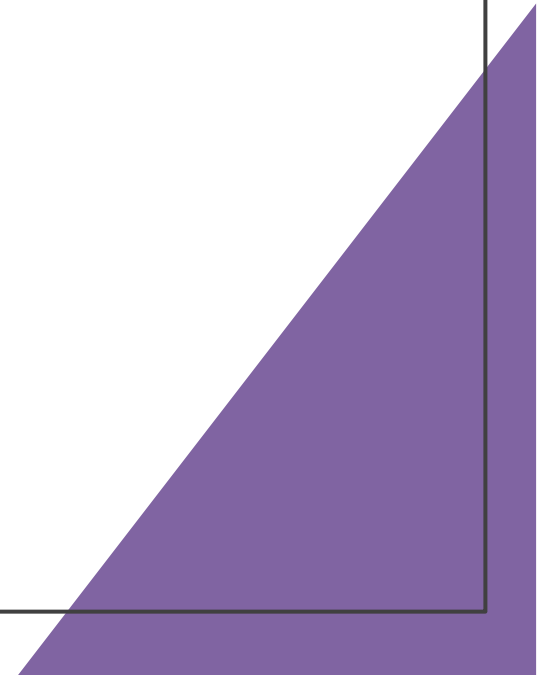


# **A Favorite Pastime: Disease and Disinformation in the Cold War**

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November 16, 2022



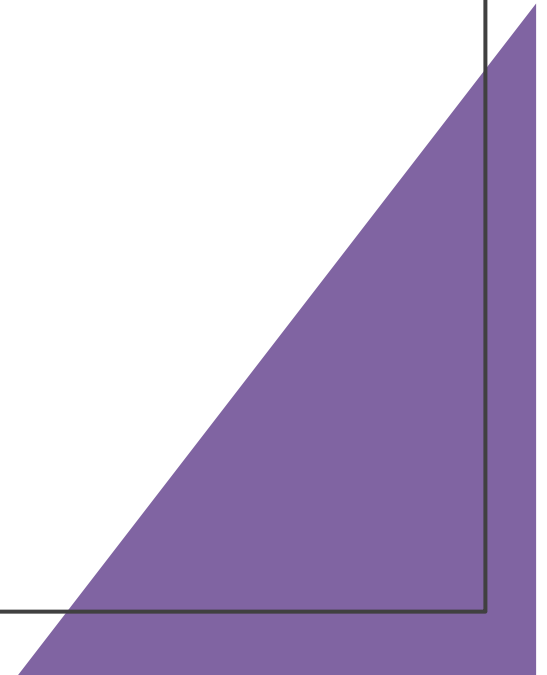
# Introduction

- Charges, counter-charges, allegations and disinformation regarding disease and biological warfare were a substantial part of the Cold War propaganda and information contest
- Precursor to current disinformation efforts RE: COVID-19 and other outbreaks
- Contributed to spread of medical misinformation

# Introduction

- Psychological Warfare vs. Active Measures
- “False Alarm:” Korean War BW Allegations
- Charges & Countercharges
- Operation Denver
- Postscript

# **Psychological Warfare vs. Active Measures**



# Psychological Warfare (USA)

- “psychological operations outside the United States and its possessions, for the purpose of (1) undermining the strength of foreign instrumentalities, whether government, organizations, or individuals, which are engaged in activities inimical to the United States, and (2) to support United States’ foreign policy by influencing public opinion abroad in a direction favorable to the attainment of United States’ objectives.”

-“Office of Special Operations Directive No. 18/5.” Central Intelligence Agency, March 29, 1948.

Source: [Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945–1950, Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment](#)

# Psychological Warfare (USA)

- “Development of programs designed to build and maintain confidence among other peoples in our strength and resolution, and to wage overt psychological warfare calculated to encourage mass defections from Soviet allegiance and to frustrate the Kremlin design in other ways.”
- “Intensification of affirmative and timely measures and operations by covert means in the fields of....political and psychological warfare with a view to fomenting and supporting unrest and revolt in selected strategic satellite countries.”

-“NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security.”  
National Security Council, April 14, 1950.

Source: <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-68-9.htm>

# Psychological Warfare (USA)

- Used by US government to influence foreign public opinion during the Cold War
- Employed both overt and covert means, including funding media outlets, civil society groups, political interference, propaganda, information outreach, and forgeries
- Covert psychological warfare began to be abandoned by late 1950s; turn towards primarily open and licit methods of influencing foreign opinion

# Active Measures (USSR)

- Use of propaganda and disinformation to advance USSR interests, undermine adversaries
- USA main target during Cold War
- Provocations/false and misleading information/“Fake news” stories/forgesies/
- Influence target audience (public and decision makers)



# Active Measures (USSR)

- “The term “Active Measures’ came into use in the USSR in the 1950s to describe overt and covert techniques for influencing events and behaviour in foreign countries. Disinformation – the intentional dissemination of false information – is just one of many elements that made up active measures operations.”

Source: Cull, Nicholas J., Vasily Gatov, Peter Pomerantsev, Anne Applebaum and Alistair Shawcross. [“Soviet Subversion, Disinformation and Propaganda: How the West Fought Against it. An Analytic History, with Lessons for the Present: Final Report.”](#)  
LSE Consulting, October 2017. P. 6

# Active Measures (USSR)



- “Dezinformatsiya”;  
Intensified in late 1950s
- Centralized in 1959:  
Department D of FMD
- Became Service A in  
1962
- “Fraternal” services  
participated (GDR; CZH;  
Cuba, etc.)

# Active Measures (USSR)

- 350-400 actions per year by 1965
- By 1985, Service A was spending \$3-4 billion per year
- Much of the KGB felt they were winning the struggle against the “Main Enemy” up until the Soviet collapse

# Active Measures (USSR)



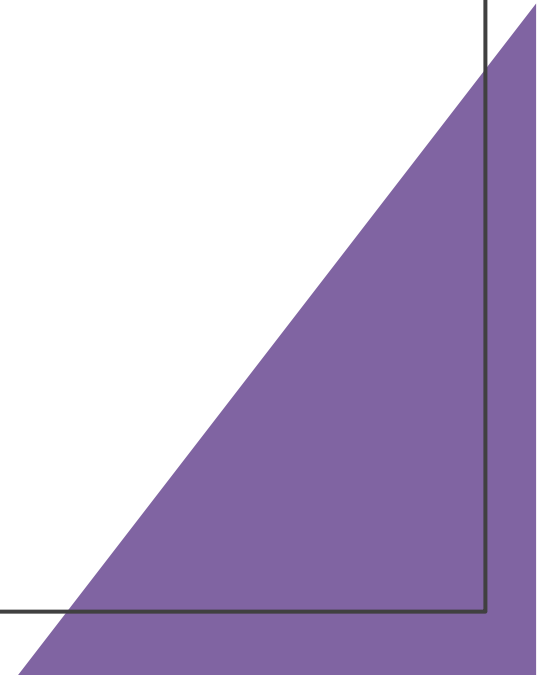
- “Our friends in Moscow call it ‘dezinformatsiya.’ Our enemies in America call it ‘active measures,’ and I, dear friends, call it ‘my favorite pastime.’”

—Col. Rolf Wagenbreth, Director of Department X, East German foreign intelligence (HVA/X)

Source: Schoen, Fletcher and Christopher J. Lamb.  
[\*Deception, Disinformation, and Strategic Communications: How One Interagency Group Made a Major Difference.\*](#)  
Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2012.  
P. 8

Source: Thomas Rid. *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020. P. 195

# **“False Alarm:” Communist Allegations of Biological Warfare in Korea**



# False Alarm



“Chinese propaganda poster from the Korean War era: *“Vaccinate everyone, to crush the germ warfare of American imperialism!”*” Image via [Wikipedia](#) Found via [Wilson Center Digital Archive](#)

- During the Korean War (1950-53), China, North Korea, and the USSR claimed that the United States engaged in widespread use of biological warfare (BW) in North Korea and China
- The US denied the charges



# False Alarm



- Unit 731 Trial: Japanese BW unit based in Manchuria (1932-45)
- Guilty of horrific crimes involving BW (experiments and use)
- US did not prosecute leaders of 731
- Soviets prosecuted 12 members of 731 in 12/1949
- Soviets used trial to embarrass US and Japan

Source: <https://munkschool.utoronto.ca/ai/feature/unit-731-medical-atrocities-in-wartime-east-asia/>

# False Alarm

- Activities of Unit 731 would provide basis of many of the Korean War BW accusations
- Two main waves of allegations: 1951, 1952



# False Alarm

- June 1950: Korean War begins
- Oct.-Nov. 1950: China openly intervenes
- Jan-April 1951: Repeated Chinese references to Unit 731 and alleged US BW preparations
- May 8, 1951: North Korean FM claims US forces left smallpox behind in 12/1950-1/1951
- Allegations subsided after a few weeks

# False Alarm

- February 22, 1952: North Korea and China begin coordinated BW accusation campaign
- Alleged diseases included anthrax, plague, cholera
- US aircraft accused of dropping disease-bearing insects, spiders, and rodents over NK and NE China in hundreds of missions
- Alleged methods in line with those used by Unit 731

# False Alarm



- China and NK produced “evidence” such as insects and leaflet bombs
- Captured US airmen publicly “confessed” to taking part in BW missions
- Two communist-sponsored committees validated the Chinese/NK charges
- Used by Mao to mobilize Chinese population

“Chinese photograph of infected fleas allegedly spread by the United States” Image via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

# False Alarm

- Charges soon echoed by USSR
- Embraced by radical European left and many in Third World
- Vehemently denied by US and most western scientists
- Issue gradually faded into obscurity with May 1953 armistice

# False Alarm

- Archival documents and memoirs from China/USSR revealed in 1990s that campaign of BW allegations was fraudulent
- Sparked by genuine fears, but continued for propaganda purposes even after China and NK realized charges were false

# False Alarm

“My personal analysis was: ....Severe winter, however, is not a good season for conducting bacteriological war. When the weather is cold the mobility of insects is weakened, and is not conducive to bacteria reproduction....Korea already had an epidemic of lice-borne contagious diseases. All the houses in the cities and towns had been burned down, and the common people all lived in air-raid shelters....Our preliminary investigation still could not prove that the U.S. military carried out bacteriological warfare.”

-Wu Zhili, Head of Chinese military medical services in Korea, writing in 1997.  
“The Bacteriological War of 1952 is a False Alarm.”

Source: Wilson Center Digital Archives: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123080>

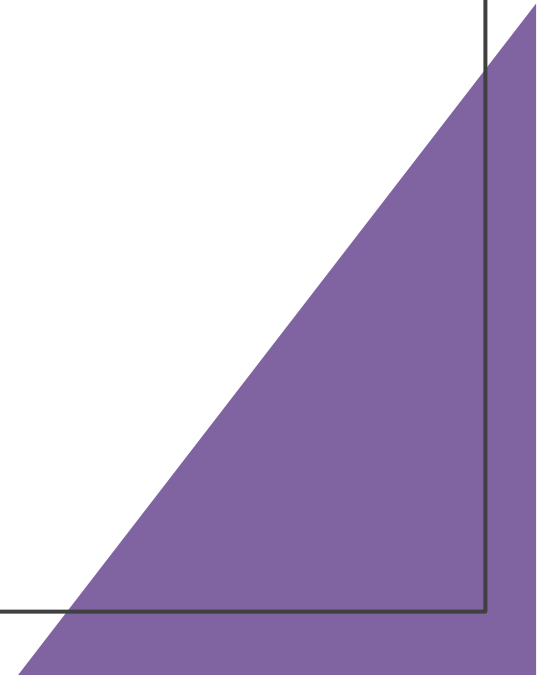
# False Alarm

- "The Soviet Government and the Central Committee of the CPSU 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."

-“Resolution of the Presidium of the USSR Council of Ministers about Letters to the Ambassador of the USSR in the PRC, V.V. Kuznetsov and to the Charge d’Affaires for the USSR in the DPRK, S.P. Suzdalev.” May 2, 1953.

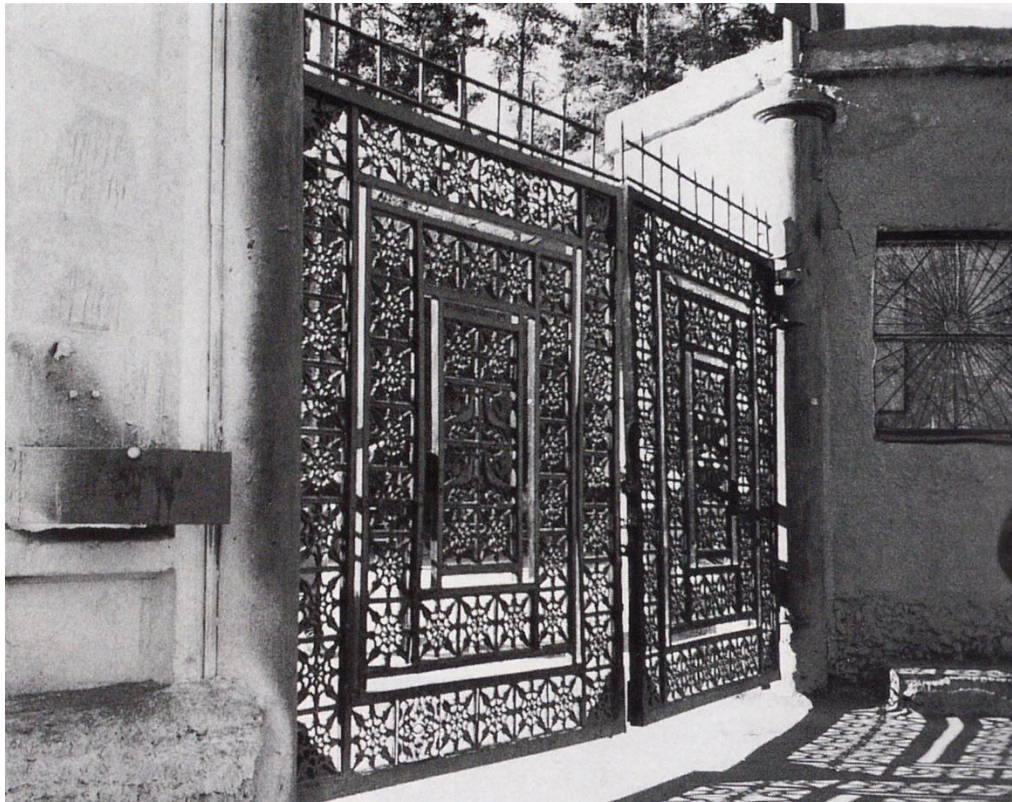
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# **Charges and Countercharges**





# Charges and Countercharges

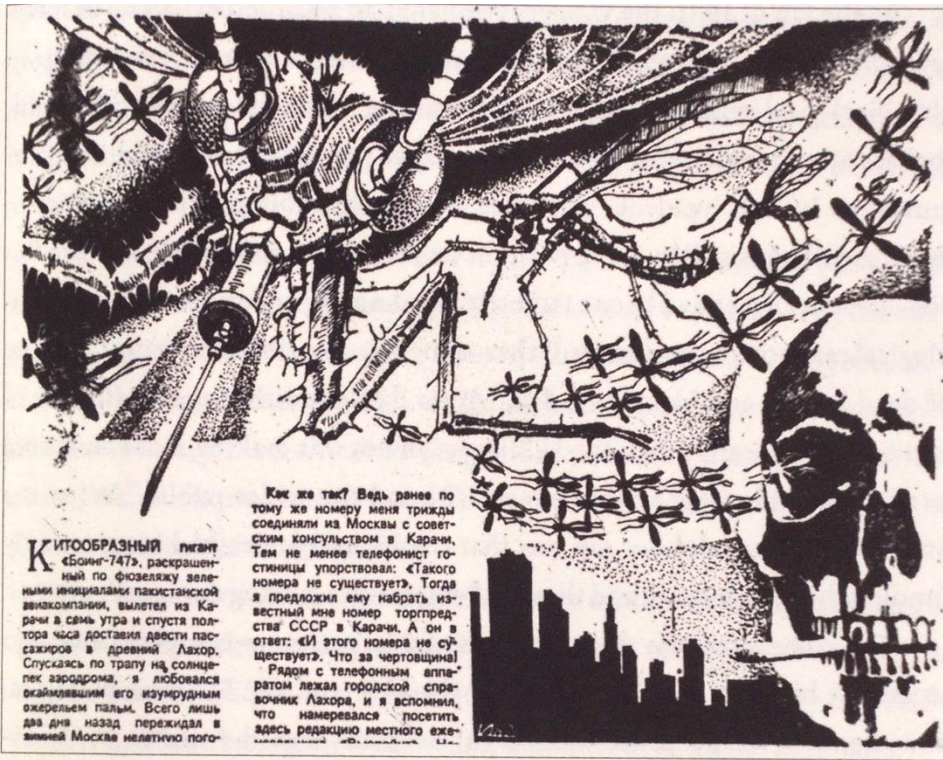


Gate of Compound 19, Soviet anthrax production facility in Sverdlovsk, now Yekaterinburg. Source: J. Guillemin, *Anthrax: The Investigation of a Deadly Outbreak*, Berkeley: 2001.

- Main US allegations include:
  - April 1979 Sverdlovsk anthrax outbreak (true)
  - “Yellow Rain:” Alleged Soviet use of mycotoxin BW in SE Asia and Afghanistan (likely false)
  - General allegations of Soviet BW Convention violations (true)

# Charges and Countercharges

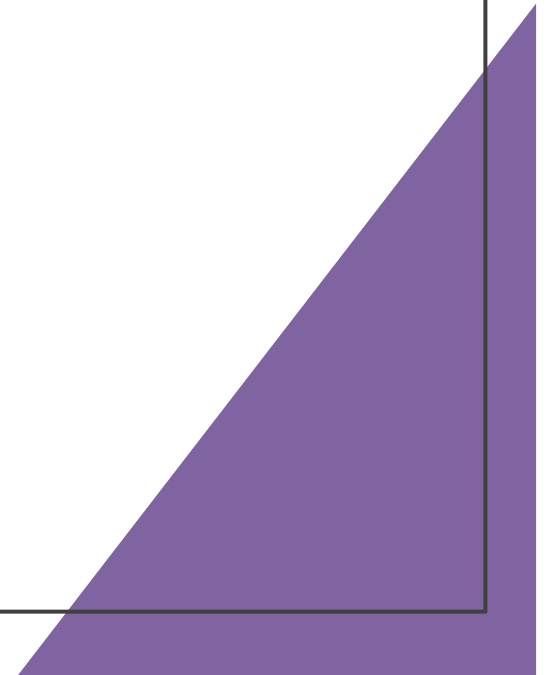
- Soviet allegations include:
  - Disease outbreaks in Soviet bloc nations result of US BW
    - EX: 1981 Dengue Fever in Cuba
  - US-funded biological research for nefarious BW activity
    - EX: 1982 Lahore Pakistan lab claims
  - Both sets of claims were disinfo



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

Source: Thomas Rid. *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020. P. 299

# **Operation Denver: AIDS, the KGB, and the Stasi**



# Operation Denver

- During the mid-1980s, the KGB and its eastern European partners mounted a major active measures campaign to convince the world that AIDS was created in a US government lab at Ft. Detrick, MD

Вирус СПИД, тяжелой болезни, от которой пока не найдено средств лечения, по мнению некоторых западных ученых, был создан в лабораториях Пентагона.  
(Из газет).



Пентагоновские СПИДциалисты.

Рисунок Д. Агаева.

Cartoon published in Pravda, October 31, 1986, alleging that AIDS was the work of American biological warfare researchers. Reproduced in: Geissler, Erhard and Robert Hunt Sprinkle. "Disinformation Squared: Was the HIV-from-Fort-Detrick Myth a Stasi Success?" *Politics and the Life Sciences: The Journal of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences* 32 (2013): 2-99. P.27. DOI:10.2990/32\_2\_2



# Operation Denver

- Conspiracy theories regarding AIDS were already circulating by 1983
- July 16, 1983: KGB article in Indian newspaper Patriot
- September 7, 1985: KGB notifies Bulgarian state of new active measures campaign regarding AIDS
- October 30, 1985: Literaturnaya Gazeta publishes “Panic in the West”

# Operation Denver

- ‘We are conducting a series of [active] measures in connection with the appearance in recent years in the USA of a new and dangerous disease, “Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome – AIDS” ..., and its subsequent, large-scale spread to other countries, including those in Western Europe. The goal of these measures is to create a favorable opinion for us abroad that this disease is the result of secret experiments with a new type of biological weapon by the secret services of the USA and the Pentagon that spun out of control.’

—Telegram from KGB to Bulgarian State Security, September 7, 1985.

Source: Selva, Douglas and Christopher Nehring. [Operation “Denver”: KGB and Stasi Disinformation regarding AIDS](#). Sources and Methods Blog, Woodrow Wilson Center, July 22, 2019.

# Operation Denver



Dr. Jakob Segal (1911-1995.) Image via Wikipedia:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Jakob\\_Segal.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Jakob_Segal.jpg)

- Aug/Sept 1986: AIDS: Not Out of Africa distributed at NAM Conference
- Jakob and Lilli Segal
- Enabled and facilitated by HVA/X
- HVA/X played major role working with KGB and Bulgarians
- Dubbed Operation Denver in July 1986

# Operation Denver

- “With the goal of exposing the dangers to mankind arising from the research, production, and use of biological weapons, and also in order to strengthen anti-American sentiments in the world and to spark domestic political controversies in the USA, the GDR side will present you with a scientific study and other materials that prove that AIDS originated in the USA, not in Africa, and that AIDS is a product of the USA’s bioweapons research.”

—Telegram from HVA/X to Bulgarian State Security, September 3, 1986.

Source: Quoted in Selva, Douglas. *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* 2019; 21 (4): 71–123. DOI: 10.1162/jcws\_a\_00907



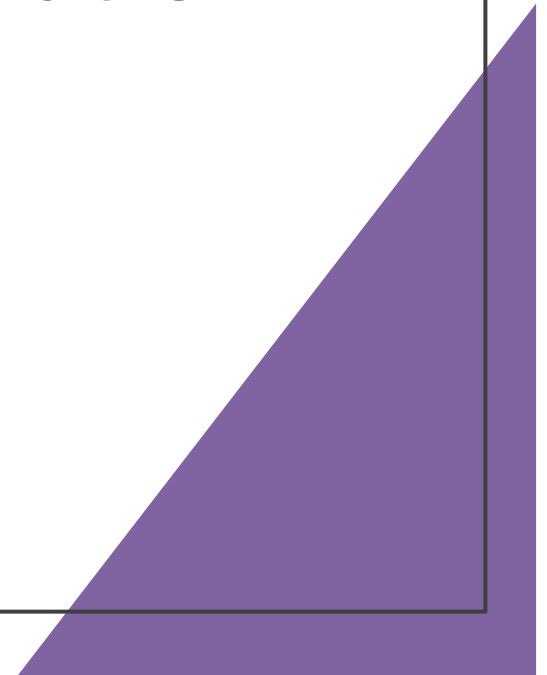
# Operation Denver

- October 26, 1986: Sunday Express (UK) published AIDS article leaning heavily on Segal's arguments
- October 31: Izvestiya cartoon
- By end of March 1987, Soviet press produced 12 articles and as many radio broadcasts repeating Detrick disinformation
- Claims continued to spread through developing world, alternative, and even into mainstream western media
- March 30, 1987: Publicized on CBS Evening News

# Operation Denver

- US strongly pushed back against AIDS campaign
- October 23, 1987: George Shultz confronts Gorbachev
- October 30: Izvestiya publishes article by two Soviet scientists disputing Detrick thesis
- Operation Denver largely discontinued at this point
- Partly replaced by “baby parts” campaign

# **Postscript: The Legacy of Cold War Medical Disinformation**



# Postscript

- Operation Denver fostered a legacy of distrust of official medical knowledge and authorities still with us today
- AIDS conspiracy theories still circulate; gateway for other such theories
- Post-Soviet Russia continues to pursue active measures, including on disease and medical research topics
- Pushing conspiracy theories regarding Ebola, H1N1, COVID/COVID vaccines
- Targeting US-funded biolabs in former Soviet states



MONICA VINADER Women's Fine Jewelry  
 Monica Vinader

# Kazakhstan denies military laboratory was seized by rioters after Russia claimed a possible pathogen leak occurred at controversial facility, as country's health ministry says more than 160 have been killed during protests in the country

- The US-funded laboratory was reported to have fallen into protestors' hands
- However, officials have denied the claims, saying the biological lab is secure
- At the secretive bio-lab, the outbreak of potentially deadly diseases is studied
- Russian state media highlighted claims that a pathogen had escaped at the lab
- There have been over 160 reported deaths since protests broke out last week

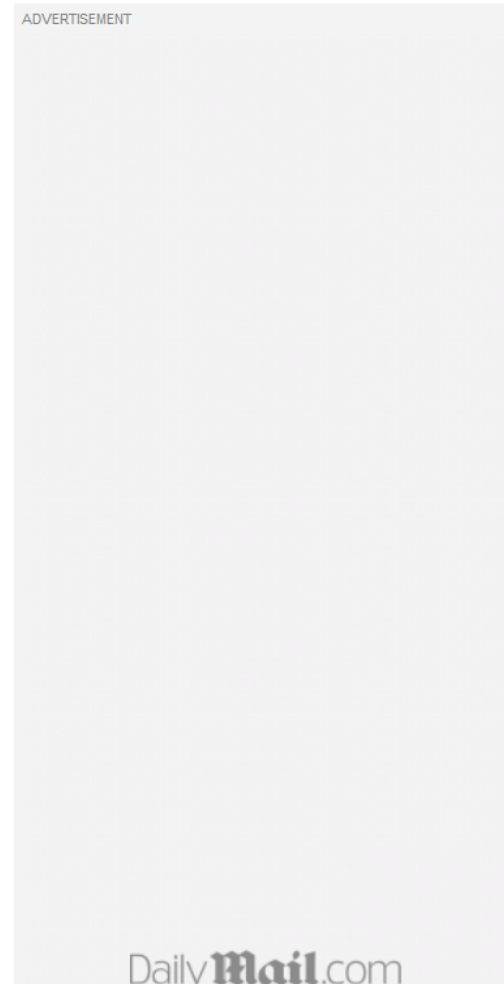
By [WILL STEWART](#)

**PUBLISHED:** 12:14 EST, 9 January 2022 | **UPDATED:** 18:37 EST, 9 January 2022

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Officials in Kazakhstan have denied that a controversial 'military biological laboratory' was seized in the recent unrest, which has so far claimed 160 lives since starting on January 2.

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# Postscript

- “Over the past years, the Russian Federation has more than once raised the issue of the military biological activities conducted by the Pentagon and agencies within its jurisdictions in laboratories located far away from the United States on the Russian border in the post-Soviet countries....
- Evidence and materials acquired during the special military operation have revealed the true nature of US military biological activities in Ukraine. The analysis of these materials has shown that the United States and Ukraine violated the provisions of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction (Biological Weapons Convention or BWC).”
- “Press release on the Russian Federation’s initiative at the UN Security Council on investigating US military biological activities in Ukraine.” Russian Foreign Ministry, October 27, 2022.
- Source: [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1835571/?lang=en&clear\\_cache=Y](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1835571/?lang=en&clear_cache=Y)

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