How the Soviets Claimed the U.S. Created AIDS, and Who Believed It

Today's coronavirus conspiracy theories recall '80s HIV disinformation campaigns, notes a Cold War historian.

June 4, 2020 By Trent Straube

Stop me if you've heard this one before: A shady global superpower secretly experiments with biological weapons, only to have the manmade virus leak out of a lab and spread across the world, leaving death in its wake.

If you follow allegations made by President Trump, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo or U.S. Senator Tom Cotton (R–Arkansas), you'll recognize the story as being about the coronavirus's alleged escape from a lab in Wuhan, China. (Scientists and researchers have debunked this conspiracy theory numerous times, yet they persist.)

But the narrative will also sound familiar to anyone versed in the history of AIDS and the Cold War. That's because starting in the early 1980s, in the dark dawn of the AIDS epidemic as it emerged in the United States, intelligence officials in the Soviet Union and East Germany launched a disinformation campaign code-named Operation Denver that claimed that AIDS was the result of a U.S. bioweapons experiment at Fort Detrick in Maryland in which the deadly virus escaped from the lab and into the world.

The MIT Press Reader offers a fascinating interview with Cold War historian Douglas Selvage about the goals of the Soviet propaganda campaign (for example, to spread anti-American sentiment and to seed discord within the United States), which countries were willing to believe it and why (African nations, understandably, were more than happy to have another country to "blame" for the origins of HIV), and how it's relevant in today's COVID-19 crisis (to avoid repeating this saga, we must educate young people how to navigate the internet and understand conspiracies and "fake" news).

Here's an extended response from Selvage about the history of conspiracy theories as they relate to pathogens and pandemics:

> Still, as a historian, I am not surprised that conspiracy theories would arise in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the Middle Ages, if not long before, people have responded to epidemics and pandemics by trying to find a responsible party or parties, often in the form of

a scapegoat. For example, some Christians in Europe blamed the Jews for the bubonic plague and responded with violence and murder.

Often, victims of repression and real conspiracies also respond with suspicion to pandemics and other disasters, and to explain the seemingly inexplicable, they craft conspiracy theories. For example, the KGB [the Soviet secret police] was not the first to accuse the U.S. government of constructing the AIDS virus. Already in 1983, some members of the gay community in the U.S. had accused the federal government of constructing the virus in order to kill off gay Americans. This came at least partly in response to their frustration with decades of discrimination, the accelerating death toll from HIV/AIDS, and the lagging, at times callous, response of the Reagan Administration to the pandemic. As it became clear that African Americans were also suffering disproportionately from the disease, some African Americans came to believe in and spread similar conspiracy theories. Such accusations seemed plausible to many, given the history of racism in the United States, including in the medical field. One particularly reprehensible episode was the Tuskegee syphilis study, in which the U.S. Public Health Service had observed the long-term effects of syphilis on infected African-American sharecroppers and their offspring for four decades, from 1932 to 1972, without providing them with effective medical treatment, even after penicillin had proven effective against the disease.

Of course, political extremists, in and out of power, often develop or exploit conspiracy theories to their own ends. In my article for the Journal of Cold War Studies, I demonstrate how the perennial right-wing U.S. Presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche and his organization promoted a variant of the AIDS-from-Fort-Detrick thesis. They promoted the claim that a Soviet fifth column had infiltrated the National Institutes of Health through the World Health Organization and then genetically engineered the AIDS virus at the National Cancer Institute's facilities at Fort Detrick. Although LaRouche's organization counter-attacked the KGB disinformation with its own version of the Fort Detrick thesis, and the KGB and Moscow attacked LaRouche, both apparently borrowed elements from each other's conspiracy theory in constructing their own.

One can see a similar dynamic today between Russian disinformation and U.S. conspiracy theorists if one closely views Sputnik News and RT (formerly Russia Today) on Twitter and Facebook. Already during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2013-16, these Russian propaganda outlets spread reports that the virus had been created by the U.S. in collaboration with Great Britain and South Africa in order to kill off Africans. That is, different virus, similar disinformation. So, it did not surprise me that certain propagandists in Russia spread similar rumors about the origin of Covid-19. Since I knew less about Chinese disinformation efforts, it surprised me that Beijing apparently decided to revamp the old, Soviet disinformation and to apply it to the new virus.

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