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The Kremlin's Never-Ending Attempt to Spread Disinformation about Biological Weapons

GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT CENTER

MARCH 14, 2023

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Introduction

Russia, like the Soviet Union before it, has pushed false claims for decades about biological weapons in an attempt to create mistrust in the peaceful global efforts and public health institutions that counter biological threats. Since the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, [Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem](#) has increased the volume and intensity of its disinformation about biological weapons in an unsuccessful attempt to deflect attention from its invasion of Ukraine, to diminish international support for Ukraine, and to justify its unjustifiable war.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States, has been working with allies, partners, and international organizations to reduce legacy threats from the Soviet Union's nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons in former Soviet states, including Ukraine and Russia. The Kremlin now falsely presents this [peaceful cooperation](#) as alleged U.S. biological military

activity abroad. Russia has repeatedly abused its position as a member of various **international fora** to further **spread** these **lies**. But the Kremlin fails to mention in its disinformation that Russia actively participated in these programs until it unilaterally ceased cooperation in 2014.

History of Spreading Biological Weapons Disinformation

Many experts have exposed both Russia's and the Soviet Union's historic dissemination of biological weapons disinformation as coordinated campaigns intended to create distrust in the United States and between our allies and partners. One particularly well-documented case occurred in 1951-1953 during the Korean War. The Soviet Union, North Korea, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) **accused** the United States of infecting animals with pathogens and releasing them into the PRC and North Korea. Soviet representatives raised these false charges at various international fora, including the United Nations (UN). Between mid-March and mid-April 1952, 25% of all Soviet media coverage **focused on these false allegations**. The intense coverage generated significant public attention on this issue, which resulted in **millions of people** protesting against the United States' alleged use of biological weapons. Historians have **identified at least 12 documents** from the archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union proving the allegations were false. Despite the evidence, these fictitious narratives occasionally resurface, and in February 2023 the **PRC repeated** the false Soviet claim that the United States had used biological weapons in North Korea in the 1950s.

The most infamous example of Soviet biological weapons disinformation occurred in the 1980s, when the Soviet Union created a false narrative that the United States had genetically engineered the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) – the virus that causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). This disinformation campaign is popularly known as **Operation Infektion**, or **Operation Denver**. The Soviet Union's Committee for State Security (KGB) **spread this false narrative** throughout the world by planting fake stories in international media. A **1985 KGB telegram** stated, "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." **Multiple archival documents** and **on-the-record testimonies** by former KGB officers conclusively proved it was a well-coordinated disinformation campaign directed by the Soviet

intelligence services. The former leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, **eventually apologized** to former U.S. President Ronald Reagan for spreading this specific false narrative.

Russia's War Against Ukraine

To justify its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Kremlin has recreated and promoted several fictitious narratives including some related to biological weapons. Within days of invading Ukraine, the Kremlin claimed the presence of “biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine” as one of its false pretexts for its attack. One Russian parliamentarian **claimed one month after the invasion**, that “it is obvious that the special operation aimed at protecting the residents of the DPR and LPR has revealed the facts of the dangerous activities of the United States of America on the territory of Ukraine.” Yet, one year later, the Kremlin has provided no credible evidence of these claims. Other **baseless justifications** included the need to “denazify” the government of Ukraine and an alleged NATO plot to dismember Russia.

Having failed to achieve a quick victory over Ukraine, and experiencing multiple battlefield setbacks, the Kremlin then further expanded its push of disinformation about biological weapons in a desperate attempt to portray Ukraine and the United States as aggressors. One of the Kremlin's most notable false claims is that the United States worked with Ukraine to train an **army of migratory birds, mosquitos and even bats** to carry biological weapons into Russia. The Kremlin likely zeroed in on these false narratives because public health laboratories routinely study migratory animal species to assess and counter animal-borne pathogens. Russia's allegations are absurd, not the least because such species, even if they could be weaponized, could not be restricted to stay within Russia's territory and thus could also endanger Ukraine itself, as well as other countries in the region.

Other parts of Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem, such as **Kremlin-funded media outlets** and **Russian Intelligence-linked websites**, echo one another to spread the same false narratives around the world. The Kremlin also relies on so-called “experts” to speak to the press, using a variety of Russia-controlled or pro-Russia mouthpieces to create an amplifying effect. For example, since February 2022, Lieutenant-General Igor Kirillov, Commander of the Biological and Chemical Protection Troops of the Russian Armed Forces, has significantly increased his media engagement. In his statements, Kirillov regularly claims the

United States was involved in the creation of **Mpox** and **COVID**, and that it is developing biological weapons able to selectively **target ethnic groups**, without ever providing proof of his claims. The U.S. Government is concerned that this false narrative may be a prelude for a **false-flag operation** where Russia itself uses biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons in Ukraine, and then attempts to blame it on Ukraine and/or the United States.

The Kremlin is also feeding these narratives to the people of Russia in an attempt to create a false reality in which the Kremlin was “forced” to intervene to defend Russia’s citizens from foreign enemies. Without the perception of an existential threat, the government’s military losses in Ukraine would be much harder to justify to its population. Russia does not adequately train new recruits before sending them to the front and does not provide **sufficient safety equipment and well-functioning armaments**. The military has gone as far as to ask recruits to pack **tampons and pads** for wound care, as the military does not have enough first-aid supplies for its troops. These false narratives about biological weapons facilities are intended to convince the people of Russia that their sacrifices for the war are still justified.

Russia’s Parliamentary Commission on the Investigation of U.S. Biological Laboratories in Ukraine

In March 2022, **under the initiative** of the Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin, the Russian government created the Parliamentary Commission on the Investigation of U.S. Biological Laboratories in Ukraine. This commission emerged one month after Russia launched its February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Deputy Federation Council Speaker Konstantin Kosachev and Deputy State Duma Speaker Irina Yarovaya co-chair the **parliamentary commission**, which also includes 14 senators and 14 Duma deputies.

Since the commission’s creation, it has served as a key Kremlin platform for spreading disinformation. Yarovaya regularly makes **announcements** claiming “proof obtained by the commission fully confirms the U.S.-created network of biological intelligence worldwide,” but she has never provided evidence. Over time, Yarovaya’s allegations have become increasingly sensational and have drifted into the realm of science fiction. In July 2022, **Yarovaya claimed** that the Kremlin had studied Ukrainian servicemen’s blood and their analysis showed the servicemen had been subjected to “secret experiments,” which transformed them into “the most

cruel monsters.” Again, the commission provided no evidence supporting these preposterous claims.

The commission’s real role appears to serve as a platform from which to inject the information environment with a sustained drip of various false biological weapons disinformation narratives. The commission **recently announced** it will release a report in mid-April 2023, containing evidence proving the claims from its year-long disinformation campaign. The April report will likely feature recycled disinformation, interviews with Kremlin-linked so-called “experts,” and **a number of documents** already in the public domain that outline the United States’ peaceful cooperation and assistance to Ukraine. As with other examples of the Kremlin’s disinformation, the purpose of the commission’s report will not so much be to persuade the world that the Kremlin’s false claims are true, but rather to sow doubt and confusion in an attempt to undermine international solidarity with Ukraine.

Using Multilateral Organizations to Spread Disinformation

In addition to the commission outlined above, the Kremlin attempts to spread its false claims by abusing the public platform of multilateral organizations. Following the Soviet Union’s practice in the 1950s, Russia has promoted biological weapons disinformation at several multilateral fora. Shortly after launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022., and ever since, Russia repeatedly has abused its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to hijack the Council’s agenda and push its baseless claims regarding purported biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. The majority of Security Council members have repeatedly and forcefully refuted and dismissed Russia’s claims. **Izumi Nakamitsu**, UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, has even stated, “the United Nations is not aware of any biological weapons programs” in Ukraine. Since the Kremlin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has called numerous meetings at the United Nations to raise its biological weapons allegations, which **U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield** has called “a colossal waste of time,” and an attempt “to distract from the atrocities Russian forces are carrying out in Ukraine and a desperate tactic to justify an unjustifiable war.”

At a meeting of the **Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) in April 2022**, all States Parties to the Convention, including Russia, were invited to an event held by the United States, Germany, and Ukraine describing the true, peaceful nature of our cooperation and assistance activities with

Ukraine, which provided an opportunity for delegations to ask any questions about such activities directly to the individuals responsible for conducting them. Unsurprisingly, the Russian delegation chose not to attend this event. Just a few months later, and for only the second time in the history of the BWC, Russia requested a

formal consultative meeting of States Parties pursuant to Article V of the Convention to consider these false allegations. When the consultative meeting failed to endorse Russia's allegations, Russia for the first time in the history of the BWC lodged a complaint with the UN Security Council under Article VI of the BWC, alleging that the United States and Ukraine were in violation of the BWC. In this instance, too, **Russia failed to support its baseless allegations**. The resolution Russia proposed to establish a commission to conduct an investigation failed by a colossal margin with only Russia and the PRC voting in favor. The United States, the United Kingdom, and France opposed, and all ten elected UNSC members abstained.

At the **Ninth BWC Review Conference** held in late 2022, Russia again repeatedly tried to derail the important work of a multilateral disarmament forum in an attempt to spread disinformation and legitimize its fictitious narratives. Instead of working with other States Parties to meaningfully strengthen the implementation of the BWC, Russia repeatedly put forward proposals designed solely to thwart and delay the work of the Review Conference. Russia's actions regarding the BWC amounted not only to spreading disinformation, but to directly hindering — and potentially weakening — the functioning of critical international instruments.

Conclusion

Moscow continues to push false information about biological weapons, without providing any credible evidence. Over a thousand members of the scientific community have **signed a letter** penned by **Russian experts** openly disputing the Kremlin's claim, saying the work of peaceful biological research laboratories in Ukraine does "not imply any development of biological weapons or even the use of particularly dangerous pathogens in the laboratories. The list of destroyed strains published by RIA Novosti and other Russian media outlets contains not a single particularly dangerous strain."

The United States' peaceful cooperation and assistance activities comply with and help fulfill our obligations under the BWC. These cooperation and assistance activities have been transparent and designed to help countries detect, prepare for, and respond to outbreaks of infectious

diseases. Russia seeks instead to cast peaceful research to prevent disease in Ukraine and around the world — and the U.S. cooperation and assistance to support it — as nefarious biological weapons programs. The Kremlin's biological weapons disinformation campaign aims to deflect, distract, and misdirect. Russia has a history of accusing others of doing what it is doing itself, and its recent biological weapons claims related to Ukraine are no different. The United States assesses that Russia continues to maintain an offensive biological weapons program **[in violation of its obligations under the Biological Weapons Convention.](#)**

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