

Lies, damned lies and Russian statistics

Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine is partly being justified on the basis of an alleged US biological weapons programme in the country. In reality this is a Russian disinformation campaign, which dates back to 2009 and which acquired a new role following the invasion. This article describes the background to the campaign, how it is being conducted and its impact in shaping the global view of the war.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Europe has been experiencing its greatest war for over 75 years. Fighting has been savage, thousands have been killed, over 10 million civilians have fled, the destruction of Ukrainian cities has been enormous, and there are grave concerns that the worst is yet to come. There has been serious concern that Russia might turn to chemical and biological warfare in order to defeat Ukraine.

Disinformation about both, but particularly biological weapons already plays a role in the war, creating and sustaining the fear that they will eventually be used.

Nato, the WHO and the G7 have warned about the risk of chemical and biological warfare and similar sentiments have come from the US, French and British governments. US national security advisor Jake Sullivan¹ and the German chancellor Olaf Scholz have directly warned the Russians against using chemical and biological

weapons.² Nato has activated its Combined Joint CBRN Defense Task Force and the US government, together with Nato, is delivering protective equipment for Ukrainian civilians and soldiers. The EU is stockpiling protective equipment and medicine in case they are needed. Meanwhile, Ukraine is buying large amounts of medicine and antidotes, including atropine, from India. The humanitarian organisation, Direct Relief, has met the Ukraine ministry of health's request for some 220,000 vials of atropin³ and Kyiv's deputy mayor has asked for 200,000 respirators to shield Ukrainians from chemical attacks.⁴

Russia's bioweapons 'offensive'

The main reason for all this is the Russian disinformation campaign about an alleged US offensive bioweapons programme in Ukraine, which, Russian officials claim, is intended to develop biological weapons to destroy the Russian people. These accusations have become an integral part of Russia's *casus belli* for war with Ukraine and could - potentially - become a pretext for chemical and biological warfare. Denials of these accusations by Ukraine and the US government have so far failed to affect the Russian disinformation campaign. President Vladimir Putin for example repeated these and other claims about the war in a Council of Lawmakers meeting in April 2022, stating: "The entire course

of recent events, including the Kiev regime's claims to possess nuclear weapons, the deployment of a network of Western biolabs on Ukrainian territory, the seamless supplies of cutting-edge weapons to Ukraine, has confirmed that our reaction to those cynical plans was correct and timely."⁵

Russian disinformation claims that the US biological weapons programme in Ukraine is organised under cover of the US Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) programme. Beginning in 1991, CTR's original purpose was to assist the USSR in dismantling its vast nuclear arsenal and prevent nuclear weapons or nuclear material from falling into the wrong hands. The programme was later expanded to assist former Soviet republics in removing or converting facilities that had been part of the vast Soviet biological weapons programme and ensure peaceful employment for scientists.⁶ Facilities such as the Stepnogorsk bioweapons facility in Kazakhstan (which could have produced 300 tonnes of weaponised anthrax a year) were destroyed, while at the same time the US government helped build civilian laboratories like the Richard Lugar Centre for Public Health Research in Georgia. The emphasis in CTR activities gradually shifted from disarmament to biosurveillance, biosafety and biosecurity, especially after the 2001 anthrax attacks in the US and the 2003 SARS outbreak in Asia. Before the invasion of Ukraine, the CTR

Lies, damned lies and Russian statistics

programme spent 62% of its \$360m budget on biological projects in places like Ukraine and Georgia.⁷ The Russian government participated in the CTR programme, but withdrew in 2012. Even before that - in 2009 - the Russians initiated a disinformation campaign and accused the US of using the CTR programme as cover for illegal biological weapons research.

Old and new disinformation campaigns

Similar operations occurred frequently during the cold war, up to 1991. The most infamous one took place between 1985 and 1988, when the Soviet KGB and the East German ministry for state security (Stasi) planted the accusation that the US military had invented the HIV/AIDS virus as part of an illegal bioweapons research project (see *CBRNe World* 2020-01). The aim seemed to be the undermining of US credibility and fostering anti-American sentiment. It is also possible that the USSR hoped to use such disinformation to conceal its own illegal biological warfare programme.

It might be tempting to think that this campaign against the CTR programme is just another example of 'new wine in old bottles', but that would be to misunderstand it. The KGB/Stasi disinformation operation on the origins of HIV/AIDS peaked in the second half of the 1980s, paradoxically while the Soviet leadership was attempting to reform itself and end the Cold War with the west. In fact the KGB/Stasi operation happened autonomously from official Soviet policy and probably hampered Soviet efforts to reduce Cold War tensions, whereas the current campaign against the CTR programme is fully amalgamated into Russian foreign and national security policy. The Russian National Security Strategy from December 2015 mentioned the growing threat from the network of US military-biological laboratories within states neighbouring Russia.⁸ In 2017, President Putin claimed that the US military was acquiring biological material from Russians, presumably to make a biological weapon targeting ethnic Russians. In 2019, the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov

attempted to pressure Armenia into allowing access to three biological laboratories funded by the US.

'Access' should probably be understood as 'control over', because these facilities are by nature public health facilities and therefore open to visitors. For example, Russian disinformation about illegal bioweapons activities has frequently been directed against the Richard Lugar Centre for Public Health Research and the Russian ministry of foreign affairs has demanded access to the facility, despite visits by nine Russian scientists between 2016 and 2020.⁹ In November 2018, a group of international experts from Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) member states visited the facility in Georgia, examined relevant documents, interviewed the staff, and concluded that nothing out of the ordinary was taking place there.¹⁰

President Putin achieved a major victory in the campaign when he met the Chinese president, Xi Jinping during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. In their joint statement dated 4 February, the leaders declared their desire to collaborate and resist US foreign policy, including Nato enlargement and the expansion of US military-biological facilities around the globe.¹¹ President Xi has his own reasons to accuse the US of illegal bioweapons activities, not least to counter US criticism over the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and whether the SARS-CoV-2 virus might have originated from a Chinese laboratory. The joint statement shows Putin and Xi's determination to build their alliance around, among other things, propaganda about alleged but non-existent US bioweapons activities.

From Twitter to the UN security council Ukraine only played a minor role in the Russian bioweapons disinformation campaign before the February 2022 invasion. Clearly, other issues were more important following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing war in the Donbas. This began to change in late 2021, while the Russian army intensified its buildup of forces near Ukraine. In December 2021, the Russian defence minister, Sergey

Shoigu claimed that they had detected the delivery of containers of unknown chemical compounds from the US to Ukraine.¹² Eduard Basurin, head of the People's Militia Directorate in the Donetsk People's Republic, claimed to have evidence that US-made botulinum toxin and benzoxazepine had been delivered to the Ukrainian army for "provocations".¹³ US officials feared that Russia might attempt to justify an invasion with an incident involving chemical or biological agents. During a press briefing on 16 February 2022 a spokesperson for the US state department said: "This, however, has not stopped the Russians from advancing these false claims to include reports of unmarked mass graves of civilians allegedly killed by Ukrainian armed forces, and statements that the US or Ukraine are developing biological or chemical weapons - the latter for use in the Russian-controlled territories - or that the west is funnelling in so-called guerrillas and terrorists to kill locals. These allegations, again, are entirely, completely false. They are entirely untrue."¹⁴

As soon as Russian troops crossed into Ukraine, the hashtag #USBiolabs began to trend on Twitter with the claim that the actual purpose of the invasion was to target illegal US military-biological laboratories. The claim was promoted by TikTok videos, on Youtube (one video was viewed more than 350.000 times), on Reddit and QAnon sections on the social media 8chan.¹⁵ It later turned out that Twitter user Jacob Creech in the US started the tweets. The campaign was quickly reinforced by Russian officials, firstly by the Russian embassy in Sarajevo, later by former Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, the foreign minister, Lavrov and President Putin. It is not clear why, but a possible reason is that it provided a new justification for the invasion following the initial failure of Russian forces to capture the Ukrainian capital Kyiv. The fact that rumours about US biological weapons laboratories began to circulate on social media probably also convinced the Russians to put this allegation front and centre of the war.

In March and April 2022, the

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Lies, damned lies and Russian statistics

Russian military held a series of press briefings claiming that it had found evidence of an illegal US biological weapons programme in Ukraine.¹⁶ Russian military representative Major General Igor Konashenkov and Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov¹⁷ (Chief of the Russian radiation, chemical and biological protection force) presented allegations of a US biological weapons programme in Ukraine consisting of 30 biological laboratories funded and supervised by the US military. One of this programme's goals was to develop biological weapons, which were "capable of selectively targeting different ethnic populations" and which could reach their target through migrating birds.¹⁸

The Russian ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia, raised this topic in the UN security council and in an informal security council meeting held by Russia in the so-called Arria format. Barbara Woodward, the British ambassador to the UN described the allegations as "wild, completely baseless and irresponsible conspiracy theories" at the security council meeting on 11 March.¹⁹ At the security council meeting on 18 March, the American UN ambassador, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, called the Russian claims a "tirade of bizarre conspiracy theories" and "malarkey".²⁰ The French UN ambassador, Nicolas de Rivièrè, stated at the same meeting: "Russia is mounting a disinformation campaign. This meeting is not based on any proven facts."²¹ While these might be viewed as predictable reactions, it is also worth noticing that the allegations were dismissed by the WHO and EU officials. Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN High Representative of Disarmament Affairs, said on 11 March that the UN was not aware of any biological weapons programme in Ukraine. Nakamitsu made it clear that while the BTWC did not have a verification mechanism there were procedures available for holding consultations, exchanging information and even to launch an investigation in accordance with the BTWC.²² So far, Russia has not used any of the solutions she presented.

The evidence

It is worth looking closely at the

'evidence' from the Russian government. For example, the Russian ministry of defence has stated that Ukraine acquired Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) from Turkey, which it intended to modify to deliver biological weapons. Documents were later uploaded to the ministry's Facebook-page, showing how the Ukrainians asked the Turkish producers about the UAVs' capabilities, including if they could carry a 20litre (4.4gallon) dispensing system to deliver aerosols.²³ The questionnaire appears to be authentic, but the wording bears a striking similarity with questions used by the EU for import and export control of dual use material, simply proving that Ukrainian officials follow the same regulations as the EU, which Ukraine hopes to join one day.²⁴

Frequently Russian officials use documents from the public domain as 'proof' of nefarious activities, which also applies in the case of alleged German assistance to a biological weapons programme in Ukraine. The German government launched a biosecurity programme in 2013 and within this framework, the German army's Institute of Microbiology (IMB) collaborated with the Institute of Experimental and Clinical Veterinary Medicine in Kharkiv. The IMB helped Ukrainian scientists with molecular diagnostics in order to study the pathogens that cause anthrax, brucellosis, leptospirosis and African swine flu.²⁵ Researchers from the Friedrich Loeffler Institute (FLI) near Greifswald also began to collaborate with colleagues in Kharkiv in surveying bat parasites, including bloodsuckers such as ticks and fleas. The aim was to identify potential threats to public health. Ukrainian researchers shipped parasites drowned in ethanol to the FLI for further study. The Russian ministry of defence and the ministry of foreign affairs have claimed that this collaboration is proof of Germany's 'bio-military activities'. As Russian diplomat G M Gatilov declared at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva on 31 March 2022: "German actions, previously unknown to the general public, carry the same threat as US biological experiments and require

detailed study."²⁶ German scientists deny this and one surprised FLI scientist commented: "The Russians must know it's a lie."²⁷

To sum up, there is no hard evidence indicating the presence of an offensive biological weapons programme in Ukraine. While the Russian government has obtained many documents - some of them genuine - they are taken out of context and misrepresented by Russian officials.

The results

Has the Russian disinformation campaign succeeded in justifying the Russian invasion of Ukraine? That depends on the criteria established for judging success or failure. It must be assumed that the purpose of the current Russian disinformation campaign is to sow discord among US allies, prevent support to Ukraine and legitimise the Russian invasion. It is safe to say that in the first part the campaign so far has utterly failed. Without exception, Russian disinformation has failed to discredit US support to Ukraine and create divisions within Nato. On the contrary, the Russian claims have been met with derision and strengthened western resolve to help Ukraine, including against the possible use of chemical and biological weapons.

On the other hand, the campaign has managed to persuade a quarter of the American public that the US military has been developing biological weapons across Ukraine.²⁸ This is probably not least due to Fox News host Tucker Carlson, who gave the Russian allegations credence on his popular show Tucker Carlson Tonight, and who accused the US government of lying about the issue. The campaign may also have been a success inside Russia. Anecdotal evidence show that Russian soldiers use the argument about illegal bioweapons when encountering disgruntled Ukrainian civilians living under occupation. Russian mothers refer to this disinformation when they talk to their sons captured by the Ukrainian military and a 68-year-old Russian woman used the bioweapons claim when she explained to Al Jazeera why she supported the war: "After the

coup d'état in Ukraine in 2014, which took place with the participation of the US, the country came under external control, (...) Over the years since the coup, Ukraine has become the poorest country in Europe and is flooded with all sorts of weapons, including biological. For Russia, this is a dangerous and aggressive neighbour. I believe that Russia was forced to take this step."²⁹

This attitude is reflected in a Russian survey, mentioned on the media site Lenta.ru by the end of April. According to this survey 84.4% of Russians had heard about the presence of a US biological weapons programme in Ukraine and 66.5% believed that biological weapons were being developed in these laboratories.³⁰ Although it is impossible to say for sure if the numbers are reliable it is a fact that a considerable amount of Russian biological weapons disinformation since

2009 has been for that country's internal consumption, and that this has probably shaped public opinion about the war.

The Russian and Chinese governments also seem to collaborate when it comes to disinformation, including that about US biological weapons. Russian statements and claims are frequently repeated almost verbatim by the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs and China has aggressively promoted the idea, that the US military has a global network of 336 military-biological laboratories in 30 countries.³¹ Chinese state controlled media like *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *Xinhua News* or *T-House* have over one billion followers on Facebook, while Russian news channels only have 85 million followers.³² Russian disinformation about biological weapons activities is therefore being amplified through Chinese state controlled media and

could potentially shape world opinion about the war.

A post-truth world shaped by strongmen

What makes this situation so absurd and paradoxical is the fact that there are no WMD, including biological weapons, in Ukraine. The CTR is a benign programme intended to stop the spread of WMD, not to make them. Nonetheless, a sizeable number of people believe otherwise and the lie is being used to justify a war of aggression against Ukraine. British author George Orwell explained in an essay in 1943 that this is what happens when the very concept of objective truth begins to fade and it becomes possible for any strongman to decide that two and two are five. As Orwell wrote in the middle of the second world war: "This prospect frightens me much more than bombs - and after our experiences of the last few years that is not a frivolous statement."³³

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/16/statement-by-nsc-spokesperson-emily-horne-on-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-call-with-nikolay-patrushev-secretary-of-the-russian-security-council-3/>

² <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/news/anne-will-scholz-warnt-putin-vor-chemiewaffen-li.219192>

³ <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-04-08/card/ukraine-s-health-ministry-orders-antidote-to-chemical-weapon-jhliiy2YU7sUks4DdXn>

⁴ https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-04-19-22/h_9d6472ff98e6a6956b7cf3239d5ca712

⁵ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68297>

⁶ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3057517/fact-sheet-on-wmd-threat-reduction-efforts-with-ukraine-russia-and-other-former/>

⁷ <https://thebulletin.org/2022/02/us-official-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-risks-release-of-dangerous-pathogens/>

⁸ <https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10736700.2021.1964755>

¹⁰ <https://thebulletin.org/2018/11/the-russian-disinformation-attack-that-poses-a-biological-danger/>

¹¹ <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>

¹² <https://tass.com/world/1379319>

¹³ <https://en.topwar.ru/190525-himicheskoe-oruzhie-na-donbasse-v-ozhidanii-provokacij.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-february-16-2022/>

¹⁵ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/02/ukraine-biolabs-conspiracy-theory-qanon/>

¹⁶ https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12412052@egNews

¹⁷ https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12415508@egNews

¹⁸ https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12412437@egNews

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/yet-another-lie-in-russias-disinformation-campaign-against-ukraine>

²⁰ <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-thomas-greenfield-at-another-un-security-council-meeting-called-by-russia-to-spread-disinformation-about-ukraine/>

²¹ <https://onu.delegfrance.org/ukraine-has-no-biological-weapons-programmes>

²² <https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/High-Representatives-briefing-to-the-Security-Council-on-Threats-to-International-Peace-and-Security-11-March-1.pdf>

²³ <https://www.facebook.com/1492252324350852/posts/3194563360786398/>

²⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32020R1749>

²⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/are-russias-claims-of-ukrainian-biological-weapons-a-propaganda-ploy/a-61673434>

²⁶ https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/1807445/

²⁷ <https://www.science.org/content/article/russians-must-know-it-s-lie-ukrainian-bat-research-spun-false-tale-bioweapons>

²⁸ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/ukraine-russia-bioweapons-theory-1.6412029>

²⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/6/the-russians-who-rally-behind-putins-special-operation>

³⁰ <http://populi-vox.ru/opportunities#rec442033528>

³¹ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202203/t20220309_10649938.html

³² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/04/08/russia-china-disinformation/>

³³ <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/looking-back-on-the-spanish-war/>