



The AIDS Myth at 30

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Abstract

In 1985 the KGB and East Berlin's professor of Biology started the AIDS disinformation campaign by accusing the United States of America of having constructed and spread the AIDS agent in the course of biological weapons research. Now, 30 years later, a German authority, The Federal Commissioner for the Records of former East Germany's State Security Service, the "Stasi", is spreading disinformation regarding the alleged substantial involvement of Stasi officers in the campaign.

Keywords

KGB, HIV, AIDS, Genetic engineering, Fort Detrick, USAMRIID, Biological warfare preparations, Disinformation, Stasi, CDC

Short Review

Thirty years ago the "HIV-from-Fort-Detrick-myth" was created. In summer 1985 Jakob Segal, a retired Professor of Biology who specialized in neither genetics nor virology, started to expound on the origin of the AIDS causative agent. Segal, a Soviet citizen living in East Berlin, doubted the widespread hypothesis that HIV was derived from viruses found in African nonhuman primates. Instead he guessed that HIV was a product of biological weapons development performed by the United States [1]. He mentioned "strong indications that AIDS evolved in the US research center for biological warfare in Fort Detrick by genetic engineering" [2].

Segal was immediately advised by Benno Müller-Hill, West Germany's leading expert in molecular genetics that "there is hard evidence that the virus was transferred in 1979 in Africa from monkey to men and spread afterwards. . . . The claim that AIDS was a product of DNA manipulation was not supported by evidence" [3]. He urged Segal: "Since the crime assumed (but not validated) by you would be such a major one it is irresponsible, in my mind, to regard the alleged in-vitro recombination performed in Fort Detrick as proven according to the data provided by you and to bring them [those data] before the public" [4].

But Segal was not convinced and started to spread the allegations. They were first published in late August 1986 in Harare, Zimbabwe, at the margins the Eighth Summit of Non-Aligned Nations in a booklet entitled "AIDS: USA-home made evil; NOT imported from Africa" [5]. The US Department of State (USDOS) immediately took note of these severe accusations and successfully ordered its diplomats residing in East Berlin to obtain a copy of Segal's paper [6,7].

The Washington Administration was concerned because similar accusations had been already made by the Soviet press: On 30 October 1985 Soviet journal *Literaturnaya Gazeta* published a paper entitled

"Panic in the west or what is hiding behind the sensation surrounding AIDS" [8]. In this article it was also claimed that the AIDS agent was isolated and released as part of the US biological warfare research program.

From the beginning it was assessed by USDOS that the KGB was the driving force behind the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* paper [8]. That assessment can now be proved. Christopher Nehring has found two documents in the archives of the former Bulgarian state security service issued by the KGB and dealing with the disinformation regarding the origin of HIV. The Soviets informed their Bulgarian colleagues on 7 September 1985 that "we are undertaking a number of activities related to the appearance over the last few years in the United States of a new dangerous disease called [...] AIDS, and its subsequent widespread occurrence in other countries, including in Western Europe. The goal of the activities is the creation of a (beneficial to us) belief abroad that this disease is the result of an out-of-control secret experiment with new types of biological weapons carried out by the U.S. special forces and the Pentagon" [9].

We do not know whether the KGB invented this allegation rather than plagiarized it. Many more or less plausible hypotheses had been forwarded at those early days regarding the origin of AIDS [10]. The claim that the AIDS agent had been isolated and spread by US scientists in the course of biological warfare preparations had been already made in *Patriot*, a widely unknown Indian newspaper [11]. The accuser was allegedly a "well-known American scientist and anthropologist ... who wants to remain anonymous". *Literaturnaya Gazeta* merely reproduced claims put forward in *Patriot* nearly word for word [9].

Many sources including USDOS are convinced that *Patriot* was sponsored by the KGB as a disinformation outlet and that the "Letter to the Editor" which held the Pentagon responsible for the deadly epidemics was the first step of KGB's disinformation campaign [12,13]. But corresponding proofs are still lacking. The KGB document issued in 1985 does not mention the letter published in *Patriot* and does not give the impression that their disinformation campaign had been started already in 1983.

We do not know either whether Segal was ordered by the KGB - directly or indirectly - to elaborate and spread the myth. We know with certainty, however, that Segal was not the scientific expert of the KGB as USDOS had originally assumed after the Harare paper became known [12]. This conclusion can be drawn for several reasons, especially since Segal's myth differed fundamentally from the version spread by the KGB:

First, the KGB version presented in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* assumed a natural occurrence of HIV or of its ancestors in Africa

or South America. That notion corresponded with the majority of the hypotheses forwarded in the mid-1980s regarding the origin of AIDS. Segal, however, was a outspoken opponent of the assumptions of an African origin of AIDS, of the title of his Harare booklet "NOT imported from Africa". Similar to numerous African doctors Segal was convinced that the AIDS-from-Africa theory was motivated not by scientific evidence but by racial prejudice.

Secondly, according to the KGB version scientists who collected HIV or its ancestors in Africa or South America as part of an US biological weapons development program brought the virus to laboratories in the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, and Fort Detrick, Maryland. The KGB rumour also claimed that final isolation of HIV took place in CDC's Maximum Containment Laboratory. By contrast, the CDC was not mentioned by Segal.

Thirdly, while the KGB assumed a natural origin of HIV Segal proclaimed a artificial creation of the agent by means of genetic engineering at Fort Detrick.

Furthermore, in another document issued not before the end of October 1986 and filed in the Bulgarian archive, the KGB admits explicitly that Segal's myth had been published independent of their own activities: "Independently of our efforts, the version got picked up by a number of large bourgeois newspapers, including the English *Sunday Express* - which inured the story with additional veracity and authority. Especially well-known became the articles and brochures by the author Jacob Segal, a professor of the Humboldt Institute at the Berlin University" [14]. At that time the KGB revised its original characterization and adopted Segal's version regarding the artificial construction of HIV by genetic engineering.

Moreover, the KGB stopped its AIDS disinformation campaign by the end of 1987, after numerous US objections including the objections forwarded by Secretary of State George P. Shultz when he met General Secretary Gorbachev on 23 October 1987 in Moscow [10]. Segal, on the contrary, did not change his mind even after the discovery of the real ancestors of the HIVs and continued his disinformation campaign even after East Germany and the Soviet system collapsed until his death in 1995.

Presumably Segal did not act on behalf of the KGB. Was he instructed by others?

After the peaceful revolution in East Germany, officially the German Democratic Republic (GDR), two former officers of the GDR security service, informally known as the "Stasi", claimed that the myth was elaborated and spread by KGB *and Stasi in cooperation* and that Segal was their puppet [15].

No documentary proof regarding the alleged role of the Stasi was provided and the allegations could be fully rejected. [16] Nevertheless the claims of the former Stasi officers believed and spread by several authors, especially by Dr. Thomas Boghardt, at that time historian of the International Spy Museum in Washington [13] Boghardt did not only repeat the claims of the former Stasi officers without confirming them, but did enrich them with additional unfounded allegations. His influential paper was published in a journal edited by the CIA and was honored with an "Annual Studies in Intelligence Award" which is sponsored by the CIA.

A thorough critical review of this paper revealed that Boghardt's assertions regarding the major role of the Stasi in creation and spreading the myth is wrong: The Stasi was not substantially involved in the AIDS disinformation campaign, neither creating nor spreading the myth [10].

We reached this conclusion even after Thomas Nehring had provided us with some additional documents found in the archives of the former Bulgarian State Security Service which dealt with some attempts of two or three Stasi officers to cooperate with their Bulgarian colleagues regarding the myth between 1986 and 1989. These East German officers were members of the *Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung*

(HV A, Main Directorate A) of the GDR Ministry for State Security, department X (ten), responsible for disinformation. They already had been informed by the KGB at an unknown date before October 1986 about the Soviet AIDS disinformation campaign with the intention for them to participate in the action.

When the HV A/X officers became aware in September 1986 on the distribution of Segal's booklet in Harare - presumably by surveillance of the US Embassy in East Berlin - they immediately contacted their Bulgarian counterparts. On this occasion they pretended that their department had triggered Segal to elaborate the myth and that their department was responsible for the world-wide distribution of the myth, thus suggesting their responsibility for the release of the Harare booklet. But that was not correct [10].

Presumably also false was the claim of the Stasi officers to have been involved in the production of a movie dealing with the different hypotheses discussed in 1987-88 on the origin of AIDS. Such a film, *Die Afrika-Legende*, was indeed broadcasted in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1989 and in an extended version entitled *Monkey Business*, in the United Kingdom. But there is no independent proof of Stasi participation in the production and co-funding of the film except for the minutes taken of two meetings of the Bulgarian and East German secret service officers. Besides that, the film does not focus on the myth. Segal does summarize it. But a dozen other experts interviewed, including Myron Essex, Robert Gallo, and Luc Montagnier, rejected it or did not mention it at all [10].

The only real activities of the HV A offers in that field have been the submission of several papers more or less related to AIDS and publicly available. They requested their Bulgarian colleagues to join their activities in spreading the myth although they knew that "Big Brother" - the KGB - had already stopped the campaign and although the East German Government had dissociated from the myth and that the myth had been evaluated as "politically deleterious" by other departments of the GDR Ministry of State Security.

Stasi documents which survived the peaceful revolution in East Germany are filed and evaluated by The Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former GDR, abbreviated "BStU". Surprisingly a publication recently released by the BStU adopted the claims of the Stasi officers and the minutes taken from the conferences held between the Bulgarian and German secret service men completely uncritical and without seeking for independent proof [17]. The authors also uncritically repeated doubtful assertions claimed by former Stasi officers and/or their unofficial collaborators or informers.

Moreover, they omitted completely the reactions of the GDR government and internal critical reviews of the myth by other departments of the Minister for State Security. When the United States realized that East Berlin's Jakob Segal, who was mistakenly regarded as the KGB's scientific expert, continued to accuse the USA of having created the AIDS agent (and thus accusing them not only to have threatened the world with a novel deadly disease but to have grossly violated the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention) they protested in East Berlin against Segal's allegations. Within a few days the Foreign Ministry of the GDR consulted other involved ministries and informed the US Embassy in East Berlin that the Government does not share Segal's position [18]. Unfortunately Segal was not a citizen of the GDR but of the USSR. He was a member of the Soviet Union's Communist Party. Hence the leadership of the GDR was only able to forbid Segal to spread the myth within the territory of the GDR. But it was unable to prohibit him to spread the myth abroad.

Hence, thirty years after the creation of the myth disinformation is still spread regarding an alleged substantial participation of East Germany's secret service in the HIV-from-Fort-Detrick disinformation campaign.

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