

Stasi & AIDS in Africa – An Unlikely Connection

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ABSTRACT

Our contemporary time is haunted by fabricated stories or so called “fake news”. Some of them are threatening the long-term work to promote health carried out by bodies, such as the WHO. The origin of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) being a contamination and a mutation originating from primates is well-documented. Despite this well documented fact, alternative narratives are often being heard of, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa.

This article demonstrates how a story about HIV/AIDS as man-made in a military laboratory in the United States was part of an ideological warfare to discredit the enemy.

One such narrative was constructed by the intelligence services in East Germany (German Democratic Republic – GDR) as part of the Cold War. In this article, it is shown how this narrative was created and disseminated. The enemy is gone a long time ago. Still the false narrative prevails, possibly as part of another ideological power game to portrait the other as causing everything bad and thus, easing pressure on political leaders in the South to support necessary preventive actions to diminish HIV.

The purpose of this article is to put an end to a long-lasting conspiracy theory, which is still alive and partly preventing effective measures of healing.

Keywords: HIV, AIDS, Alternative narratives, Ideological warfare, Fake news

INTRODUCTION

Our age is increasingly aware of dis-information or what in common language is called “fake news”. However, this is not a new phenomenon. The reasons behind dis-information vary but are often tied to context and political goals, related to geo-politics and power.

This article will especially focus on false narratives about the origin of HIV/AIDS. The established description of the origin of HIV is that it is one of a mutation from a virus hosted by non-human primates in West-central Africa in the early 20th Century [1,2]. The origin of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) being a contamination and a mutation originating from primates is extremely well-documented. Despite this, alternative narratives are often being heard of, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. These alternative, false narratives were brought to my attention when I was working in different African countries for more than fifteen years.

One story frequently told, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, is that HIV is the result of a deliberate conspiracy carried out in a US military laboratory [3-5]. Such contesting narratives to established knowledge are not infrequently heard of [6-11]. Narratives as this thus suggest that conspiracy theories still are widespread not least in Africa, the continent most haunted by the virus [12].

In this paper, I will therefore describe how one such false, “alternative”, “fake” narrative was created. The traces lead to the Soviet KGB and the East German Ministry of State Security (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit), usually referred to as its German abbreviation “Stasi”. Below, I will describe how this false story was fabricated. Despite the fact, that the story has been proven to be a false creation the narrative as such has proven to be long-lived.

The intention of this paper is to throw light on the fabrication of a conspiracy theory about the origin of HIV, and to demonstrate that the theory is a deliberate disinformation, a fraud. Furthermore, the purpose is to use this case study to describe the emergence of conspiracy theories in general, since I believe that such theories are harmful to serious research practices, to science, and,

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ultimately, to health care, public health and to the goals of WHO to promote health worldwide.

Since the theory about HIV originating from primates in Africa is well documented, the purpose of this article is not to provide further evidence on this [13].

MATERIALS AND METHOD

In order to examine how the Stasi fabricated narratives about the origin of HIV, an ethnographic approach will be applied, including a thorough study of documents from the Stasi Archives in Berlin (Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR – BstU). Some of these studies have been carried out by the Swedish historian Christoph Andersson, whom I have been collaborating with on this issue. Books, magazines and newspapers, as well as interviews with former senior Stasi officials who were actively involved in the operation, have also been part of the study undertaken by Christoph Andersson. In 2014, another report was published in Germany that revealed new evidence of the operation, not least using archives from the Bulgarian communist-era security service [14]. Furthermore, ethnographic studies by the author from approximately 15 years in various ministries of health in eastern and southern Africa have shown that the conspiracy theory dealt with here, referred to as a fabricated, false narrative, is still widespread, not least by senior officials.

RESULTS

The original idea of blaming the USA for having created the HIV came from the KGB in the former Soviet Union [15,16] and the plan was to spread the idea to neighboring countries, in order to discredit the US. However, it was deemed a tactical advantage to assign the task of elaborating a narrative and disseminating it to the East German colleagues, mainly due to geographical factors. The department of disinformation (Hauptabteilung Aufklärung - HAV) within Stasi was given the assignment to create such a narrative and to spread it to the West through West Germany. According to this constructed story, HIV was created in a laboratory at Fort Detreck in Maryland under the auspices of the US Army. However, something went wrong in the process. What exactly went wrong was under debate for some time within HAV. Different scenarios were considered. The scenario finally chosen by the HAV was that prisoners were being infected with HIV in exchange for a shorter sentences or release. Those who survived were released, and the virus was spread fast throughout the American society through sexual contacts.

Lieutenant-Colonel Günther Bohnsack and his colleague Herbert Brehmer, who had a PhD in military history, were the Stasi officers responsible for the project, named "Operation Infektion" [17]. In order to make such a narrative credible, Stasi, however, needed a prestigious and respected scientist as companion. It was crucial that this scientist was

not aware that the project was made up as a hoax, but fully accepted and believed in the story. A retired professor of biology, Dr Jakob Segal, and his wife Lilly were chosen for this mission. Both were Soviet citizens, living in East Berlin.

The Segals were communists and loyal to the East German state, and had been informal collaborators of Stasi, but it was essential to Stasi that the Segals would believe that the narrative was genuine. The professor was presented with forged documents, which were claimed to have leaked from Fort Detreck, something that made him fully believe in the story. A contributing factor was rumors that had circulated in the US since the early 1980s about the US military using humans for experiments with biological warfare, and a story about spreading flu virus in San Francisco in 1955, where one person was presumed to have died. Another narrative is focusing on yet another experiment in Tampa Bay, where 12 civilians were supposed to have died [18]. Furthermore, official reports from the United States stated that the CIA had actually tested LSD on un-informed people [19]. An official report revealed that syphilis had been administered on African American farm workers in Tuskagee [20] between 1932 and 1972, in order to try the effect of penicillin on syphilis. There was, in other words some rumors, of which some even may have been true, already in circulation. From this point of view, another story about the origin of HIV would fit very well into the historical background. This background contributed largely to Dr Segal's conviction that the story about Fort Detreck was not only plausible but probable and even true.

The Segal couple was convinced that the Fort Detreck scenario was genuine and worked hard to spread this message. They were allowed by the East German authorities to do so at a conference in Harare, Zimbabwe [21].

They were, however, not allowed to publish their material in East Germany. The fact that they were not supported actively by the GDR authorities, however, made them feel suppressed. The conspiracy theory had also been spread in Indian and Russian newspapers, such as *Trud* and *Literaturna Gaseta* [22].

According to the Segals, the HIV epidemic started in the US in 1979, three years earlier than in Africa. According to them, the epidemic emerged as a problem a few years later in the US, around 1983. Further, they claimed that Professor Segal had his own sources of information within Fort Detreck and that the project had been deemed not useful for military purposes, due to the long incubation period of the virus. However, at this point in time, it was too late to stop the epidemic.

A few years later the East German dissident Stefan Heym got interested in the publications of the Segal couple. Heym saw them as dissidents in the GDR, since they were not accepted by the scientific establishment in the country and were not allowed to publish themselves in the GDR. Heym

had access to newspapers in the West. He thus published an interview with Dr. Jakob Siegel in the West Berlin alternative movement newspaper TAZ. This interview contributed to a large extent to the dissemination of the Stasi narrative, not only in West Germany, but in the western world [23].

Also, other narratives about experiments on humans in the United States [24], including the ones of Nathaniel S Lehrman from New York, contributed to the success of the operation. Dr. Lehrman claimed that the CIA had used [25] viruses for warfare in Africa, for instance by trying to kill the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Patrice Lumumba. Dr Lehrman also claimed that experiments with inoculation of viruses were carried out by US authorities on homosexuals. It is not known whether Lehrman developed his conspiracy theories on his own, or whether he was influenced, knowingly or unknowingly, by the KGB as part of the operation. Stasi actively circulated documents from Lehrman in scientific circles in East Berlin [26].

It seems, however obvious that the existence of several conspiracy theories made it easier to launch yet another one.

The reaction to Heym's article in TAZ was powerful. The distinguished Professor Meinrad Koch, head of the Department of Virology at the Robert Koch Institute in West Berlin, expressed in an interview in TAZ that Segal's theses were "brilliantly formulated, well created (rhetorically) but pure nonsense" [27,28].

Koch pointed out that the HIV virus was not detected for the first time in the United States in the 1980s but in Africa in the 1960s, where the first antibodies were found. He further pointed out that there was no evidence whatsoever of experiments with HIV virus on humans. Koch did not, however, blame the Segals for spreading the information, but Heym, whom he otherwise admired. He told TAZ that he admired Heym that he had read everything he had written, but despite this, he emphasized that "this time it is bad" [29].

What finally put an end to the active fabrication and dissemination of the idea of HIV being man-made came, however, from another place [30]. In a meeting between the US and the Soviet Union on collaboration on AIDS research, the US Surgeon-General made the complete closure of the desinformation campaign an absolute requirement for further collaboration in the field. The president of the Soviet Union, Michail Gorbachev, was seeking improved relations with the West and ordered the KGB to stop its disinformation [31]. The Stasi followed suit.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany in 1990 the officers responsible for Operation Infektion published a book in Germany: *Auftrag Irreführung. Wie die Stasi Politik im Westen machte* [32]. They describe in detail how Operation Infektion was planned and carried out. The book was, however, never

translated into other languages. In interviews with Bohnsack and Brehmer, they both claim that they are astonished that this narrative is still alive. Although it was a very elaborate piece of art, it is well known in German speaking countries that the whole idea of HIV as manmade was a fraud. However, it is a hoax that now lives a life of its own outside Germany.

Ironically, the TAZ, which spread the hoax in western Germany, in 1998, named it the second most successful conspiracy theories of all times [33].

DISCUSSION

The whole Operation Infektion is extremely well documented. Still, these conspiracy theories, as well as other related narratives based on misinformation, repeatedly emerge in various parts of the world, maybe in particular in Africa. Other conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus circulate as well.

After the closure of Operation Infektion, new evidence have emerged that the HIV virus has a considerably older history. A plasma sample taken in 1959 from a man in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo-Kinshasa) contains antibodies against HIV [34]. A sample from a lymph node from a woman taken in the DRC in 1960 also contains antibodies against HIV [35]. There is evidence that HIV existed in the US already in the 1960s [36] and in Norway before 1970 [37]. Recent studies suggest that the virus contaminated humans even earlier in the 20th century [38,39] or even by the end of the 19th century [40].

The question remains, why the Operation Infektion still seems to thrive in some areas. One contributing factor is likely that it fits well into an anti-colonial discourse. The thesis that HIV originates from Africa has been perceived as being racist by some authors [41] and film makers [42]. It serves well as a metaphor to explain power relations on a global level and the existence of evil forces. That these stories provide meaning to inequity and asymmetrical power relations is understandable. However, the false narrative is claimed to be a true explanation of a phenomenon, which is strongly at odds with a vast amount of evidence. And as such it is dangerous as it becomes part of preventing serious precautions and serious treatment. By the Seagals the narrative describing the faked origin of the virus has further been coupled, with other theories about prevention and treatment. The Seagals claimed, for instance, that aspirin could treat AIDS. And, since the Seagals described themselves as dissidents (although they were in fact Soviet citizens and had been informal collaborators of the Stasi), they had an image of themselves as being trustworthy [43].

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that it seems proven beyond reasonable doubt that the origins of HIV are much older than the age of HIV as a pandemic and that it originates from other

primates, it is remarkable that various conspiracy theories still have a strong tendency to flourish. Paradoxically, as shown in this paper, the theory of HIV being man-made is itself the product of a political conspiracy, a conspiracy turned autonomous. This real conspiracy is not only real but also constitutes a threat to public health.

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