

Russian Disinformation Campaigns re Biological Weapons in the Putin Era

Presentation to the NDU/CNS Tucker CBW
Symposium, 2019

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Russia and False Biological Weapon Allegations

Abstract

Starting only a few years after the end of World War II, in 1949, and lasting until 1988 under General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, the USSR maintained a near continuous campaign of false allegations of biological weapon use by the United States. Never in history had any other country carried on such a campaign of false BW allegations. Some individual “sub-campaigns” lasted well over a decade. At times, Soviet allies in Eastern Europe or Cuba assisted by introducing their own false BW allegations, with Cuba alone accounting for about 20 such instances.

After a pause of a few years between 1988 and 1995, senior Russian military officials began repeating the old false allegations. Russian officials amplified the campaign after the US government funded the transformation of former Soviet BW facilities in Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) under the Nunn-Lugar program. The Russian disinformation campaign blossomed into a continuous propaganda campaign to which was added denial of the Syrian government’s use of chemical weapons for six years and Russia’s own use of an advanced organophosphate compound in an assassination attempt against a retired KGB agent living in the UK in 2018.

The Significance of False BW Allegations

Why you don't want them, why they should not be trivialized.

"The Meselson dictum," ~ 1968-69

- The worst thing is a true allegation of BW use.
- The next worst thing is a false allegation.
- It suggests that a country has biological weapons.
- That it is using BW, and getting away with it.
- And that BW is desirable, has its uses.

The Soviet Years - 1

Detailed chapter in The Soviet Biological Weapon Program: A History, 2012, Chapter 14, pp. 407-422.

- The total number of Soviet allegations of US BW use: ~20
- Duration: 1949-1988. Ten “sub-campaigns”.
- Cuba added 18 distinct allegations; are these “independent” or was the Soviet KGB involved?
- Historically unprecedented: no other country/countries have ever done this.

The Soviet Years - 2

The two most important Soviet BW disinformation campaigns:

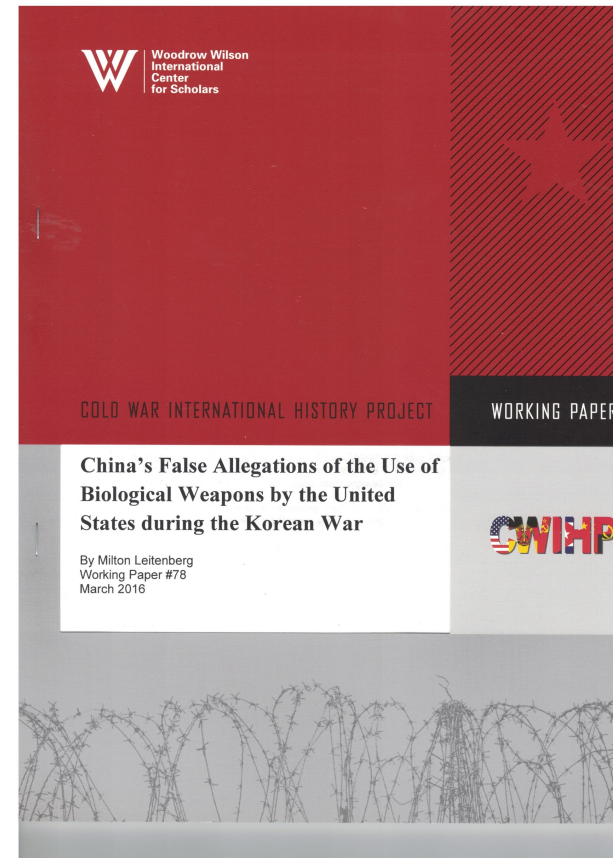
- Allegations of US use of BW during the Korean War:
 - USSR, China, DPRK: enormous international propaganda campaign, 1951-53, including in Western Europe.
 - USSR ends charges on Stalin's death in 1953.
 - China and DPRK continue to the present day.
 - 1953 Soviet Central Committee documents obtained in 1998.
- *“For Mao Zedong: The Soviet Government and the Central Committee of the CPSU were misled. The spread in the press of information about the use by the Americans of bacteriological weapons in Korea was based on false information. The accusations against the Americans were fictitious.”*

2 May 1953, Resolution of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers of the USSR.

<https://cissm.umd.edu/research-impact/publications/new-russian-evidence-korean-war-biological-warfare-allegations>

2016

- Intercession ~2005 with Chinese Ministry Foreign Affairs deputy for arms control
- PLA Academy of Military Science History journal, 2008 and 2010, discuss ML 1998 publication. Generous, but still deny.
- 2014, Chinese journal publishes death bed memoir by Surgeon General of the PLA during the Korean War, plus deputy chief of staff of army during the Korean War.
- Chinese government closes journal in 2015.



https://cissm.umd.edu/sites/default/files/2019-07/CWIHP_WP_78_China_False_BW_Allegations_Korean_War_%28March_16%29.pdf

Noose of truth is tightening around Milton Leitenberg & Co.'s collective neck.

China Rising Radio Sinoland 180310



The Soviet Years - 3

The second most important allegation was that the US produced and released the AIDS virus in order to kill Africans; only ended in 1987-88. Large percentage of US African American population believe it.

Two other important Soviet disinformation campaigns:

- India: Malaria Control Research Unit, New Delhi (Malaria)
 - 1972-1975 effort
 - WHO operated the facility, supported by USAID (one of 6 globally)
- Pakistan: Medical Studies Centre, Lahore
 - early 1970s to 1988, 18 years
 - also Malaria

Both Soviet efforts succeeded: Pakistan and India both closed the sites.

Begins again in Spring 1995

- Senior MOD BW and CW Generals from the pre-1992 years: Yevstignaev (15th Directorate), Petrov (CBW troops) join in 1998-2001.
- Simply repeated all the old pre-1992 allegations, Korean War, potato beetles, AIDS, Cuban allegations.

The Putin Era

- The number synopsized, ~20: However these are only a small fraction (and includes 3-4 debunking postings).
 - Begins in 2006.
 - The first is Zyganov, in 2006, says that the US was responsible for disseminating “bird flu”.
 - Then a press item in 2009, US responsible for swine flu.
 - The “take off” in 2013, by Onischenko, US did Zika virus, etc
 - By 2013, the focus becomes the Nunn-Lugar facility in Tbilisi, Georgia. The heaviest year appears to have been 2018.

Kremlin proxy media sites, “news agencies”, blogs that distributed the BW disinformation

Global Research	Russia Insight	USA Really
Russia Insider	Russia Front	Africa Daily Voice
Veterans Today	News Front	Afrique Panorama
RT	South Front	Internet Research Agency [IRA]
Sputnik	East Front	New Eastern Outlook
Sputnik International	Nevsky News	Project Lakhta
Media Sniper	Economy Today	Strategic Culture Foundation (runs Veterans Today)
Russia Observer	Federal News Agency [FAN] (runs USA Really)	GEORGIAN PROXIES
		Alia
		Euronews

The Anti-Georgian Nunn-Lugar campaign - 1

- This is ALL KGB/FSB work.
- Use of dregs and lackies:
 - Jeffrey Silverman, US resident in Tbilisi since 2001
 - Dilyana Gaytandzhieva, Bulgarian journalist
 - Igor Giorgadze and “fake” US patents alleging connections to the Nunn-Lugar lab, former Georgian Interior Minister and alleged coup/assassination plotter, resident in Moscow
- Russian “Fifth Column” in Georgia, open and very extensive: newspapers, TV stations, blogs, major political figures in exile in Moscow and in Tbilisi (former interim Prime Minister), pro-Russian political parties.

The anti-Georgian Nunn-Lugar Campaign - 2

In Moscow

- Gennadi Onischenko, Yeltsin-Putin years, Sanitary Inspector General of Russia, notorious “BW hound dog” purveyor of conspiracy theories
- Members of the Duma
- Then senior MOD/MFA officials
- Major General Igor Kirilov, Commander, Russian Armed Forces Radiological, Chemical and Biological Defense Troops
- Vladimir Yermakov, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Director, Department of Proliferation and Arms Control
- Even Putin chimed in on the Giorgadze materials.

The anti-Georgian Nunn-Lugar Campaign - 3

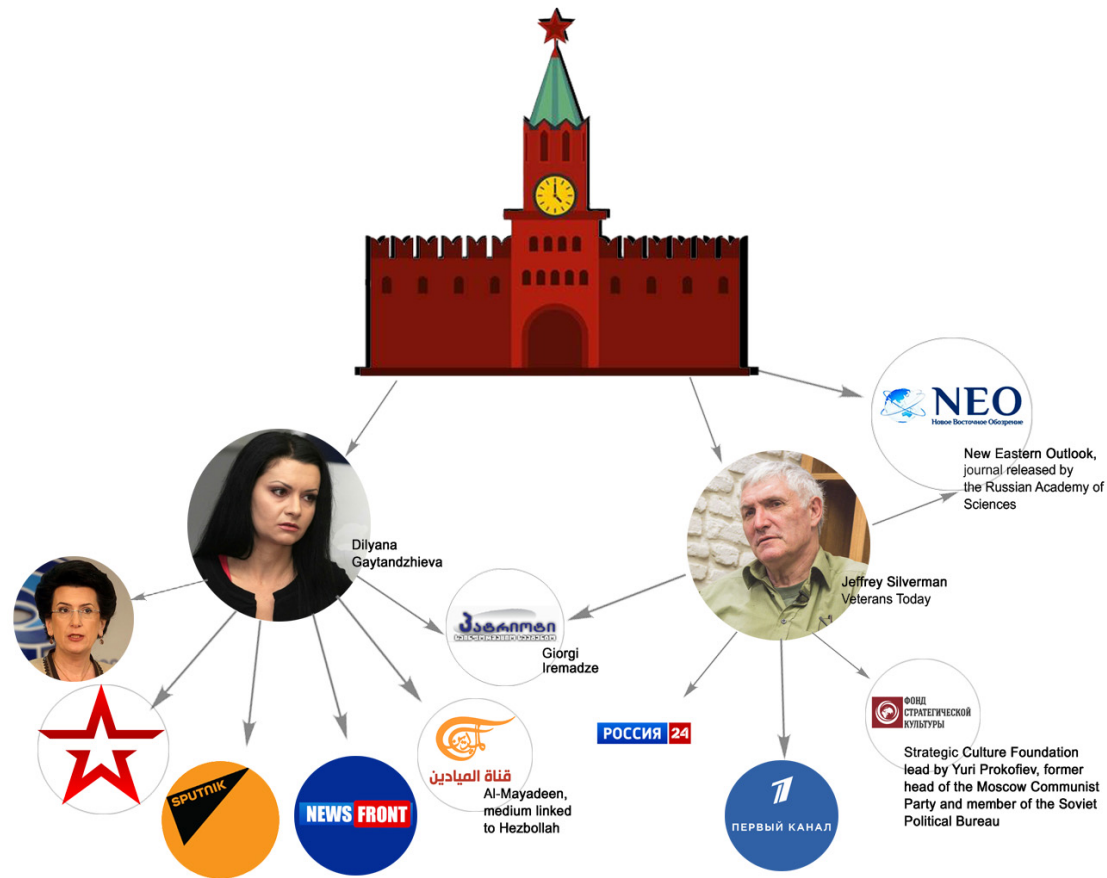
- In 2013 Dr. Gamkrelidze, then-Director of the Nunn-Lugar facility, offered an official invitation to Russian government officials, including Dr. Onishchenko, to visit the facility.
- There was never any reply from any Russian official.
- Five years later when a delegation of States Party to the BWTC made an official visit to the facility on November 14-15, 2018, the Russian government refused to participate. The Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, said: “We are not interested in visiting, like a museum excursion.”

Extract from The Strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation (not disinformation)

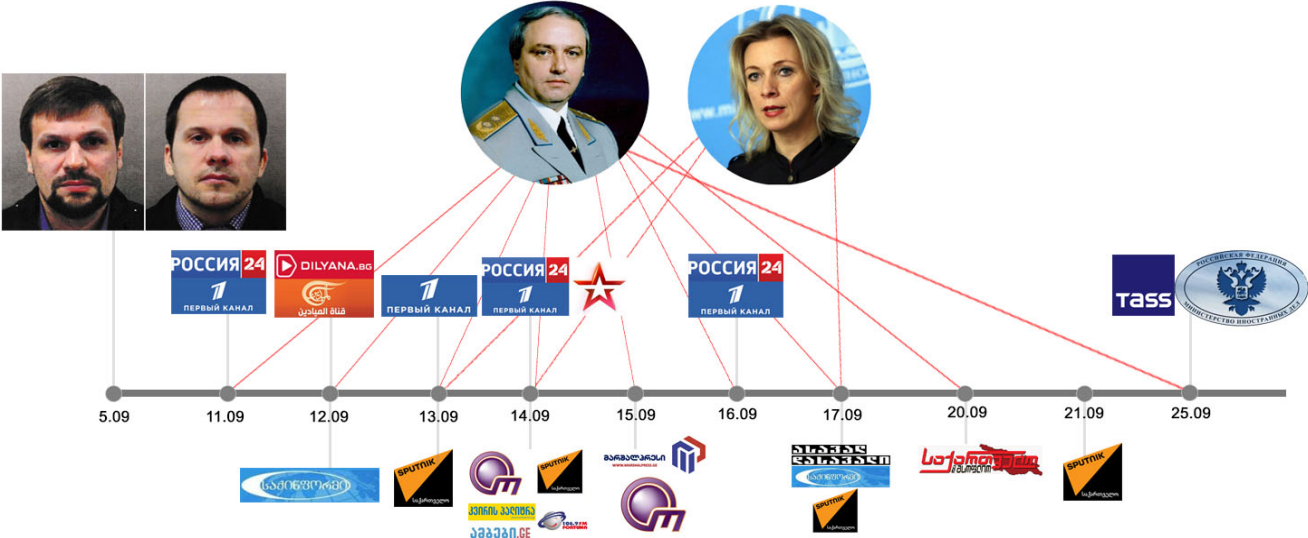
“The risk of an increase in the number of countries possessing nuclear weapons, the proliferation and use of chemical weapons, as well as uncertainty about the possession of biological weapons by foreign states and their potential for their development and production, remain. *The network of US military biological laboratories is expanding in the territories of states neighboring Russia.*”

Approved by the Order of the President of Russian Federation #683, 31 December, 2015

Example of Russian media disinformation process during a three-week period, September 2018



Additional example of short period of multimedia disinformation distribution, September 2018



Both images were produced by the MYTH DETECTOR LAB, in Tbilisi, Georgia, supported by USAID.

What is the Nunn-Lugar facility in Tbilisi, Georgia?

- It is Georgia's "CDC", Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research, National Center for Disease Control & Public Health.
- The US built it, at a cost of \$320 million
- A BL-3 facility, opened in 2013, replaced an older Soviet culture collection and research facility in the center of Tbilisi, moved 17 miles from the city center.
- US DOD scientists from WRAIR do work in it; in addition the US wanted its culture collection and contributed new cultures.
- Open to European and other scientists to work in.

The Russian disinformation lies re the Georgian Nunn-Lugar facility

- The facility spread Zika, swine flu, measles, CCHF, hepatitis, pathogen-carrying mosquito strains, etc etc etc.
- Only US DOD scientists work in the BL-3 portion.
- US scientists do secret work, not accessible to Georgian administrators.
- US still funds it.
- US runs it.
- US doing BW in it, and in the other Nunn-Lugar facilities.
- The Bulgarian journalist's "Meisterwerk": 49 pages long, and certainly not her own product, including dozens of old declassified US documents taken from DOD reports of the US offensive BW program from 1951 onward, displaying the same agents, US testing, etc and relating those to the current work at the Nunn-Lugar facility.

And the Big Surprise

- There have been about 18 visitors from Russia in the Lugar Center since 2016. Among them, 2 were working in the laboratory (WHO training), 3 were visiting for laboratory equipment installation, and others were there for introductory visits. At least half of the visitors were Russian government scientists.
- Russian TV and journalists have visited also, but their TV stations didn't air the videos afterwards and the journalists never publish stories about their visit and what they saw.
- The Russian government understands with absolute certainty what is taking place inside the Georgian facility.
- Plus international visit reports to the BWC States Party, 12-2018.

Presented to the BWC
States Party,
December 4-7, 2018
by Georgia, Germany
and nine other
governments

BWC/MSP/2018/WP.5

**Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention
on the Prohibition of the Development,
Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological
(Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their
Destruction**

3 December 2018

English only

2018 Meeting

Geneva, 4-7 December 2018

Item 7 of the provisional agenda

Consideration of the factual reports of the Meetings of Experts reflecting
their deliberations, including possible outcomes

**Building Confidence through Transparency: Peer Review
Transparency Visit at the Richard Lugar Center for Public
Health Research of the National Center for Disease Control
and Public Health in Tbilisi, Georgia**

**Submitted by Georgia and Germany, co-sponsored by Austria,
Belgium, Columbia, Iraq, Hungary, Malaysia, Mali, the United
Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States
of America**

I. Introduction

1. The voluntary demonstration of national implementation of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) may help boost confidence in States Parties' compliance with and commitment to the BTWC. To this end, and following previous peer review visits hosted by France in 2013, Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxemburg in 2015, Germany in 2016 and the Kingdom of Morocco in 2017, Georgia decided to host a peer review transparency visit at the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research (Lugar Center) of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC) in Tbilisi.
2. The Permanent Representative of Georgia to the UN Office and Other International Organizations in Geneva in its letter dated 24 July 2018 invited all States Parties to the BTWC to participate in this peer review visit. The upcoming visit was also announced during the BTWC Meetings of Experts in Geneva (7-16 August 2018). 17 States Parties from all three regional groups, among them many of the co-sponsors of this working paper, accepted this invitation. Financial support by the German Federal Foreign Office allowed for a non-discriminatory and diverse representation. In their final report, annexed to this working paper, the visitors appreciated the "significant transparency" demonstrated by the facility.
3. This fifth on-site visit demonstrated once more that it is possible to reconcile a high level of transparency with the legitimate security and intellectual property interests of the visited facility. It is thus expected that voluntary transparency initiatives will continue to advance the ongoing search for innovative and concrete ways to increase confidence in the implementation of the BTWC in the absence of any verification procedures. The States Parties submitting this paper are convinced that the diverse array of peer review visits and other transparency initiatives all provide valuable tools to increase confidence in compliance and commitment to the BTWC and will be happy to further discuss and develop their concrete forms and benefits.

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Presented to the BWC
States Party,
December 4-7, 2018
by Georgia alone

BWC/MSP/2018/WP.11

**Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention
on the Prohibition of the Development,
Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological
(Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their
Destruction**

7 December 2018

English only

2018 Meeting

Geneva, 4-7 December 2018

Item 7 of the provisional agenda

**Consideration of the factual reports of the Meetings of Experts reflecting
their deliberations, including possible outcomes**

**Transparency visit to the Lugar Center, Georgia: An
Independent Report**

Submitted by Georgia

1. Georgia reported on its peer review transparency visit to the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research (Lugar Center) of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC) in Tbilisi in working paper BWC/MSP/2018/WP.5.
2. This working paper provides an independent report by Dr Filippa Lentzos of King's College London, and should be viewed as supplementary to BWC/MSP/2018/WP.5.
3. The working paper provides substantial background on the Lugar Center; details the preparation for, and activities of, the two-day site visit; describes the visiting team's report on the visit; provides reflections from the author; and outlines the presentation and discussion of the transparency visit at the BTWC meeting of states parties.

I. Introduction

4. In a 25 July 2018 letter to BTWC states parties, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited all interested BTWC states parties to a transparency visit to the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research (Lugar Center) of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC) in Tbilisi, Georgia. The invitation was publicly communicated through a working paper to the August meeting of experts on strengthening national implementation.¹

5. Planned for 14-15 November 2018, the primary objective of the visit, as outlined in the invitation, was to demonstrate that the Lugar Center complies with the provisions and obligations of the BTWC. Through the transparency exercise, Georgia aimed to show that such on-site visits can enhance confidence in compliance with the BTWC. While it was recognised that such on-site visits only represent one of many ways in which confidence in compliance can be strengthened, it was emphasised that they are particularly useful for connecting discussions on implementation with concrete every-day procedures on BTWC-relevant sites. It was also emphasised that transparency visits are not a substitute for verification nor comparable with a compliance mechanism. In other words, the objective was not for the visiting team to make a formal judgement about whether Georgia and the Lugar Center are in compliance or not, but, instead, the aim was to provide the team with increased

¹ BWC/MSP/2018/MX.3/WP.2

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Russian government response to BWC submissions re visit to Georgian facility

"In Geneva, Russia circulated a reply memo on October 10 to BWC states party missions, claiming the Georgian side was attempting to create "a distorted image" of the Lugar Center. It noted that the lab was built by the Pentagon, that the United States covers the laboratory's operating costs including its security, and that Americans finance dual-use research conducted there. Somewhat ironically, considering the vast, ostensibly civilian, network of public health laboratories that concealed the Soviet offensive biological weapons program, the memo goes on to claim that, "in order to conceal the true character and mission of this facility it has been formally incorporated into Georgia's public health system." **Georgia's goal in inviting BWC states to visit, the Russian memo claims, is "to create an illusion of legitimacy and transparency," and Russia does "not see any value in participating in such a politically biased event."**

"The Russian disinformation attack that poses a biological danger", By [Filippa Lentzos](#), *BULLETIN OF THE ATOMIC SCIENTISTS*, November 19, 2018

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

Context: Selected Russian activities in the same time period - 1

- On August 11, 2010, Medvedev announces that Russia will withdraw from the ISTC in 2015. The initiator of this move was undoubtedly Putin, states that the US was using the Nunn-Lugar program to steal Russian secrets, technology.
- In February and March 2012, Putin decrees that in order “to prepare for threats of the future” the MOD was to develop “weapons based on new physical principles: radiation, geophysical, wave, genetic, psychophysical, etc.”
- No guise of “defensive” program; presented on Russian TV and published in the Russian press

Context: Selected Russian activities in the same time period - 2

- Poisoning of Ukrainian Prime Minister Victor Yushchenko, early September 2004, using TDD (Dioxin), in Kyiv. Produced at RIHTOP, Research Institute of Hygiene, Toxicology and Occupational Pathology, Volgograd.
- Poisoning of ex-FSB Colonel Alexander Litvinenko, London, November 1, 2006, using Polonium 210, produced at Avangard, Sarov.
- Polonium 210 was apparently also used to kill Yuri Shchekochikin, editor of Novaya Gazeta and Duma member in 2003. In the five-member Duma group investigating the 1999 apartment house bombings, four of the five quickly die.

Context: Selected Russian activities in the same time period - 3

- Support for Syrian government use of Sarin, 2013 to present
- Support for Syrian government evasion of CWC violations, 2013 to present
- Attacked OPCW and hobbled OPCW/UN Secretary-General onsite inspection mechanisms in Syria, 2018-2019
- Poisoning of ex-GRU agent, Sergei Skripal, using a Novichok CW agent (A-324) on March 4, 2018, in Salisbury, UK.

Uniform nature of Russian government response in all cases (including shutdown of MH-17)

- Denial
- Ridicule, mockery
- Massive disinformation effort
 - Offered ~20 explanations for the Novichok event: UK did it, US did it, Czechs, Swedes, Norwegians, Dutch did it....
 - Technical means in the MH-17 case: falsified satellite images, falsified radar tracks, etc.

What Does it Mean?

- Do any (other) governments believe it?
 - In Russia, their own population?
 - In Georgia, the pro-Russian population (and Armenia, Uzbekistan etc)?
 - Perhaps Hamas? African populations, if redistributed there.
- We don't know the answer, but don't underestimate, remember
 - Korean war allegations
 - India and Pakistan allegations
 - AIDS disinformation campaign
- **All were successful in what they aimed to do.**

Why Does the Russian Government do it? - 1

1. To accuse the US of doing BW, R&D or more, violating the BWC
 - Reprisal for the annual US Noncompliance statements section on Russia's non-compliance with the BWC.
 - Makes the claim that the US "has" 19 or 23 military BW facilities around the world (viz, all CTR-funded or supported sites, but not NAMRU, WRIAR, etc).
2. Diversion: Remove public attention from Russian government activities (constantly suggested by numerous commentators)
 - From murder of Litvinenko
 - From Russian invasion and continuing war in Ukraine
 - From Syrian government use of CW
 - From Russian government support for Syrian government use of CW
 - And if Putin's 2013 remarks about developing genetic weapons meant an offensive Russian Ministry of Defense BW program, to cover that up.

Why Does the Russian Government do it? - 2

3. To attack Georgia [since the 2008 Russian invasion] and to weaken US-Georgian ties

- And those of any other country hosting a Nunn-Lugar biodefense facility.

What does it tell us about Russian/Putin Government and the BWC?

- Disdain for the BWC, not much interested in maintaining, safeguarding, the integrity of the treaty. [Also Medvedev's presidency, 2008-2012]
- Willing to spend years making (hundreds of) false BW allegations against other states, to accuse the US of BW, and to attack and undermine the Georgian government for local political purposes.

EPILOGUE

- Following the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic in January 2020, Russian government media and Russian government proxy websites distributed over 400 Coronavirus disinformation posts between January 24 and May 1, 2020.
- These contained dozens of different themes, but one-third of the total accused the US government of having produced and distributed the Coronavirus.