

## **A cloud of toxic lies over Chernobyl**

Ben Macintyre, The Times, 1<sup>st</sup> June, 2019

A few days after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, The Washington Post received a sensational leak from an unknown source: a letter from the US Information Agency to a Republican senator, advising him to exaggerate the number of casualties from the explosion at the nuclear plant in Ukraine.

The Information Agency had been established by Eisenhower to influence public opinion abroad. The senator, David Durenberger, was chairman of the select committee on intelligence. The leaked letter proved that the US was attempting, in the words of its author, to “make the Chernobyl disaster into an effective propaganda campaign” by falsely asserting the accident had already claimed up to 3,000 victims. It was a shocking attempt to embarrass the Soviet Union, mislead the public and make political mileage out of terrible human tragedy.

Except the letter was a KGB forgery. This was a calculated attempt by Moscow to plant fake news and make western anxiety over the nuclear disaster appear artificially inflated as part of a cynical Cold War ploy on the part of America.

“Service A” of the KGB, the Soviet intelligence unit specialising in the deception technique known as *desinformatsiya* (disinformation), had obtained the letterhead of the USIA and then written a fake text underneath with a bogus signature.

The Post spotted the ruse and killed the story before it could run.

The forged letter was just one element in the vast toxic cloud of falsehood, half-truths and censorship that spread from the Soviet Union in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster. The gripping HBO-Sky series Chernobyl follows the aftermath of the nuclear catastrophe, reflecting the best and worst of human nature, but its central theme is the official degradation of truth and what happens when the state deliberately and systematically deceives its citizens. Soviet Russia responded to the horror of Chernobyl by trying to contain the story inside a concrete casing of lies.

Chernobyl helped to destroy the Soviet Union but the techniques of *desinformatsiya* have been inherited and refined by the modern Russian state, while fake news, and false allegations of fake news, have poisoned modern politics.

On the 30th anniversary of Chernobyl, President Putin declared that the accident should serve as “a harsh lesson to humanity”. Yet the Russian state continues to practise many of the techniques that the accident exposed, including impeding the free flow of information and manipulation of the media at home and abroad.

The KGB’s Andropov Institute, from which Putin graduated the year before Chernobyl, was the espionage school where spies were taught the dark arts of so-called “active measures” (*aktivniye meropriyatiya*), including forgery, disinformation, interfering in foreign elections, spreading false rumours and political warfare. At the height of the Cold War, Service A deployed 15,000 KGB officers under the veteran spook Viktor Chebrikov.

Some of the forgeries, like the Chernobyl letter, were fairly crude, but others were sophisticated and remarkably effective. Active measures did not always work but often muddied the waters sufficiently to sow confusion and doubt. The KGB-manufactured story that the HIV virus was created in a CIA laboratory spread to the newspapers of 40 countries and still lingers in the tainted ground-waters of conspiracy.

The KGB approach was brutally simple: every criticism of the Soviet Union, every setback, should be dismissed as western propaganda intended to blacken the regime in the eyes of the world. Mikhail Gorbachev later admitted that the Chernobyl disaster was “the real cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union” but at the time he reinforced the KGB-promoted myth that the horrified western reaction was merely “a poisoned cloud of anti-Sovietism”.

In the digital age, with an army of botnets churning out rumour and confusion, and obedient media such as Sputnik and RT, Moscow has ever greater opportunities to shape and distort not only the narrative of the present, but the past.

The Russian response to Chernobyl, the TV series, bears some disquieting parallels with the Soviet response to Chernobyl, the catastrophe. Russian tabloid columnists and state TV news have condemned the series as propaganda that exaggerates Soviet state negligence, and called for a more “patriotic” retelling of the story emphasising the bravery of rescue workers. “Chernobyl did not show the most important part — our victory”, read a headline in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the country’s most popular daily.

Russia’s pro-government NTV network, with financial backing from the culture ministry, is preparing to air its own drama of the disaster, in which a group of KGB counterintelligence officers track down a CIA agent sent to gather information at the plant. Whether the series directly implicates America in sabotaging the plant is unclear but the director Alexey Muradov

claims: "There is a theory that the Americans had infiltrated the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and many historians do not deny that on the day of the explosion an agent of the enemy's intelligence service was present at the station."

That is not a genuine theory, let alone one supported by historians: it was yet another myth forged by the KGB to obscure the truth. To the Russian government, it matters not whether the world actually believes this version, merely that it foments uncertainty: for that is the purpose, and power, of desinformatsiya.

"When the truth offends, we lie and lie until we can no longer remember it is even there," says Valery Legasov, the hero of Chernobyl, played by Jared Harris. "But it is still there."

The truth of Chernobyl was fought over in the old Cold War and has re-emerged as a battleground in the new one. But it is still there.