

# A turn in Soviet policy on AIDS

by Konstantin George

Till recently, the Soviet line on AIDS was a repertoire of lies, alleging that AIDS was developed in U.S. bacteriological warfare labs in Ft. Detrick, Maryland, and, in any case, was a problem for the “decadent” West. While in reality, Moscow mobilized huge scientific, research, and institutional resources to both combat the disease and contain its spread, for public and foreign consumption, Soviet public spokesmen downplayed the AIDS threat to the Soviet Union as trivial.

This is now out the window. The Kremlin has recognized that AIDS is a threat to the future existence of Russians, and is acting accordingly. In the March 19 edition of the Soviet government newspaper, *Izvestia*, the director of the Soviet Virology Institute, Viktor Zhdanov, issued an urgent call for “international cooperation” in the fight against AIDS:

“Soviet virologists are pressingly working on vaccines against AIDS. This has proven to be not an easy task, and so far, it has not been solved by world science. AIDS has become *the* major problem of international health, and to solve it, we need international cooperation. Soviet virologists call on the WHO to unite the strength of scientists and health researchers in all countries of the world to fight against this serious illness. We need intensive scientific investigation, an active plan of action and systematic exchange of information. We need an active international program of scientific and practical measures and Soviet scientists are ready to accept a very active part in its development.

“. . . The problem of actively carrying such an offensive against AIDS is very complicated but even this can be solved by uniting the forces of mankind. I would like to believe that, with the approaching of the 21st century, we’ll have not only a non-nuclear era but an era of victory over AIDS and other serious diseases.”

Zhdanov’s and the Soviet government’s new policy of demanding an international war on AIDS is de facto a Soviet reply to a call made last year by U.S. presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche, for East-West joint work to combat the AIDS menace. Yet—either because there is still a fight over this, or because someone would like to make it *seem* that there is a fight—the old “Ft. Detrick” charge resurfaced in the *Military Bulletin* of the Soviet press agency Novosti on March 30.

In a curt phrase, Zhdanov disclosed Soviet national-security measures to contain the potential spread of AIDS through high-risk groups such as homosexuals, prostitutes, and drug addicts: “These groups have to be systematically checked and observed.”

Within days of the Zhdanov article, the risk-group theme again emerged in the Soviet media, in a candid manner never before seen.

The March 24 edition of *Moskovsky Komsomolets* (the Moscow edition of the *Komsomol* youth newspaper) carried a nearly full-page article on homosexuality in the Soviet Union, linking the phenomenon to the spread of AIDS. The article stated that under no circumstances can the laws outlawing homosexuality be repealed, because “precisely in this milieu the disease has a tendency to spread,” and, under conditions of unchecked homosexuality, preventive measures against the spread of AIDS “would be impossible.” The paper called for the Soviet school system to begin an educational program against “sexual abnormality.”

The government daily *Izvestia*, in the week of March 16-22, carried a wave of reports on the state-directed crackdown and war on AIDS throughout the East bloc:

**Item, Bulgaria:** *Izvestia* March 17 reported that in a special appearance on Bulgarian TV, Prof. Ljubimor Shindarov revealed that out of 20,000 people tested, 22 were found to be carriers of AIDS. Of the 22, 19 were “foreigners from countries where the disease is widespread.”

**Item, Bulgaria:** *Izvestia* March 22 reported a “wide-ranging program in Bulgaria against AIDS.” “In all districts” in Bulgaria, “diagnostic labs” are at work on the AIDS problem, and a “central laboratory has been created” for screening against the disease.

**Item, Hungary:** The Hungarian media announced that “obligatory screening” was planned for blood donor and various “risk groups” to contain the AIDS epidemic. A network of about 40 laboratories to test for AIDS has been established in various health institutions nationwide.

**Item, Poland:** *Izvestia*, March 21, reported on how “Polish Doctors are Fighting with Drug Addiction.” An organization called “Monar” (“Youth Movement In Fight Against Drugs”), formed eight years ago under Marek Kotanski of the Warsaw University Psychology Department, committed itself to “the fight against AIDS.” It is receiving financial support from the Polish Ministry of Health. At the end of February, Polish Deputy Health Minister Jerzy Bonnczak announced that Poland was planning to screen 1.5 million people soon, as part of a nationwide AIDS prevention campaign.

World events sometimes contain stunning ironies. While Western leaders fiddle like Nero in the midst of the AIDS pandemic, Moscow, out of the most fundamental national survival considerations, has adopted a program against AIDS, embracing in essence the points included in the defeated California Proposition 64.