Havana Syndrome: The History Behind the Mystery

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Bottom Line

- **Possibly up to 1,500 American officials at home and abroad have suffered brain and other injuries in recent years from a mysterious malady that is reported to have begun in Havana in 2016 and has since been known as Havana Syndrome.**
- **While aspects of these health incidents remain a mystery, they recall a series of historically documented Soviet technical operations against the US embassy in Moscow that began in 1953 and lasted for decades, providing credible evidence of serious harm to numerous diplomats and other US officials.**
- **Since the fall of the Soviet Union, President Vladimir Putin and Russian military officers have publicly bragged about developing weapons that could cause health effects similar to Havana Syndrome.**
- **After attacks on officials of successive administrations, CIA Director William Burns may finally have put an end to such incidents by threatening the Russians with retaliation.**
- **But the policy of tolerating, denying, and concealing decades of Russian attacks, at the expense of American officials, has harmed the credibility and weakened the power of the US government to deter other acts of aggression.**

This article is based on an earlier work by Mr. Regenstein published in the Association of Former Intelligence Officers magazine Intelligencer, The Journal of US Intelligence Studies, Volume 28, Number 1, Winter-Spring 2023.

The Mysterious Malady

In late 2016, press reporting revealed a “new” and “mysterious” neurological malady suddenly affecting American officials around the world that appeared to have begun in Cuba. Over three dozen diplomats and CIA officers reported the onset of severe headaches and nausea, after hearing unidentifiable grinding, piercing, and unbearable noises inside their heads, with those who were exposed the longest suffering from the most crippling disabilities. This malady, popularly known as “Havana Syndrome,” was destroying the health of diplomats, intelligence officers, military attaches, and members of their families who happened to be nearby, usually at home, at the time of the attacks.[1]

The locations where Americans appear to have been targeted and harmed include much of the world, most notably Moscow and Havana. But other suspected Havana Syndrome attacks span the globe: Shanghai and Guangzhou in China; Austria, Bulgaria, France, Georgia, Poland, Serbia, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom in Europe; and also Australia, Colombia, Kyrgyzstan, Syria, Taiwan, and Uzbekistan.[2]

National security officials have been strangely afflicted even outside the White House. One incident involved Olivia Troye, a staffer on the National Security Council who worked in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building beside the West Wing of the White House.

In the summer of 2019, walking towards the White House, Troye felt as if she were being physically struck and she and others described the attack to CBS’ 60 Minutes as follows:

> *It was like this piercing feeling on the side of my head, it was like, I remember it was on the right side of my head and I got like, vertigo. I was unsteady, I was, I felt nauseated, I was somewhat disoriented, and I was just, I remember thinking, … don’t fall down the stairs. You’ve gotta find your ground again and steady yourself … The “piercing feeling” lingered as she walked by an entrance to the West Wing.*[3]

Even former President George W. Bush and his delegation may have suffered similar attacks in 2007 as the President was on his way to the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany. Former First Lady Laura Bush, in her 2010 book *Spoken from the Heart*, wrote that:

> *By the afternoon of [June 7] I could barely stand up. My head inexplicably throbbed; I was horribly dizzy and nauseated. I went to bed, pulled up the covers, and for several hours felt so awful that I might die right there in the hotel room … Nearly a dozen members of our delegation were stricken … For most of us, the primary symptoms were nausea or dizziness, but one of our military aides had difficulty walking and a White House staffer lost all hearing in one ear.*[4]

On August 26, 2021, a trip to Vietnam by Vice President Kamala Harris was delayed for over three hours after the US embassy in Hanoi reported “a recent possible anomalous health incident” there, as the administration began to call the attacks.[5]

As of the end of 2022, perhaps up to 1,500 US officials had complained of having suffered such debilitating and disabling symptoms as constant headaches, dizziness, loss of memory and vision, nausea, insomnia, and vertigo.[6] “Effects can be long-term and debilitating, with some victims using hearing aids to help counteract the constant ringing in their ears,”according to Psychiatry.com, posted on 2 March, 2023.[7]

There is also at least one report of an attack similar to Havana Syndrome against persons other than US diplomats. On March 29, 2022, the *Wall Street Journal* carried a front-page article on an apparent attack on Ukrainian peace negotiators on or around March 3 of that year. The attack caused illness and in one case temporary blindness of one of the Ukrainian negotiators. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Western experts believed that the attacks were the result of poison or some sort of electromagnetic radiation attack and blamed the suspected attack on hard-liners in Moscow whom they said wanted to sabotage talks to end the war.[8]

Causes and Culprits

The causes and possible culprits behind these attacks remain a subject of intense debate. In late March 2023, a declassified intelligence study reported that the most likely cause of the range of illnesses may be “pulsed electromagnetic energy” that could penetrate buildings using “commercial off-the-shelf technology,” with devices that are “easily portable and concealable and can be powered by standard electricity or batteries.” The report, from the Intelligence Community Experts Panel on Anomalous Health Incidents, called Havana Syndrome a “distinctive, unique, unusual neuro-sensory syndrome … unreported elsewhere in the medical literature.”[9]

In December 2020, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine provided detailed evidence implicating weaponized microwaves as the cause of the Syndrome. The report, by a panel of nineteen experts in medicine and related fields, commissioned by the State Department, concluded that the “most plausible mechanism” that caused the severe health effects during incidents beginning in 2016 was “directed, pulsed radiofrequency energy,” a category that includes microwaves.

David Relman, a professor of medicine at Stanford University who led the study, told NBC’s Andrea Mitchell in an interview:

> *There is a literature that describes health effects of a particular form of microwave energy, which is pulsed and directed. And that literature now goes back a number of decades, and was published largely by the former Soviet Union. That literature does mimic and is consistent with a number of the clinical findings that we noted … The view of some of the world's most-renowned neurologists was that among the various possible mechanisms that would explain these cases, there was one that stood out. And that was pulsed directed radio frequency energy, or microwave energy. In other words, it could be focused on one room and not another room in the same house. That's the nature of how this kind of energy can be delivered*.[10]

If correct, these studies would indicate that Havana Syndrome is not a natural phenomenon but a man-made one. One of the first suspected culprits for Havana Syndrome was the Russian government, based on its close relationship with the Cuban government and the type of attacks, which seem to parallel the descriptions given by Russian officials when bragging about new types of neurological or directed energy weapons.

In April 2012, Russian Defense Minister Anatoli Serdyukov announced that Russia's ten-year military procurement plan included weapons based on "directed energy" and "psychotronics," which would be intended to attack the central nervous system. According to Serdyukov, the development of weaponry based on new physics principles—direct-energy weapons, geophysical weapons, wave-energy weapons, genetic weapons, psychotronic weapons, et cetera—was part of the state arms procurement program for 2011 to 2020.[11]

Russian officials have said Putin was referring to microwaves when, in March 2018, he told the Russian legislature, the Federal Assembly, in his annual address that "Russia has all reasons to believe that we are a step ahead" of other countries in creating "prospective weapons based on new physical principles."[12]

Was it the Russians? The War of Leaks

On September 11, 2018, NBC News reported, "Intelligence agencies investigating 'mysterious attacks' that led to brain injuries in US personnel in Cuba and China consider Russia to be the main suspect … backed up by evidence from communications intercepts," according to five knowledgeable officials familiar with the "lengthy and ongoing investigation" by the FBI and CIA.[13] Two years later, in an investigative report on Havana syndrome for *GQ*, Russia expert Julia Ioffe wrote that "the most compelling evidence came from publicly available data such as mobile phone tracking information that allowed CIA investigators to deduce the whereabouts of Russian intelligence officers, and place them in close physical proximity to the CIA officers at the time they had been attacked when they were in Poland, Georgia, Australia, and Taiwan. In each case, individuals believed to be Russian Federal Security Service or military intelligence agents were within range of the

CIA officers who had been hit in 2019. In two of the incidents, location data apparently showed Russian Federal Security Service agents in the same hotel at the same time their targets experienced the onset of symptoms."[14]

Similarly, on December 7, 2020, NBC News reported that it was told by "a source with direct knowledge" that "a number of new incidents have been reported in the last year or so … including a CIA officer who experienced symptoms in Poland last spring, two CIA officers hit in East Asia last fall, and incidents in London in May and December of 2019. The source said the CIA, using mobile phone location data, had determined that some Russian intelligence agents who had worked on microwave weapons programs were present in the same cities at the same time that CIA officers suffered mysterious symptoms."[15]

Case Not Closed

Other intelligence officials have leaked contradictory information suggesting no such evidence exists, including electronic intercepts. Their views were expressed in a December 2, 2021, New York Times article summarizing the case against Russian involvement, citing highly classified intelligence based on official sources. It stated that the United States had no defectors, penetrations, or intercepts that would link Russia to the attacks and that, "intelligence officials have not found any hard evidence that points to a cause [of Havana Syndrome]." The unnamed officials stressed that there are no intelligence intercepts implicating an adversarial spy service and that no one has detected microwaves, other readings of energy pulses, or any other weapons that could be to blame.

Directed energy, such as microwaves, remains one of the theories, perhaps the leading theory, according to American officials. But, so far, the CIA has been unable to collect hard evidence to show that any of the people suffering from symptoms of Havana syndrome have been hit with some sort of energy pulse. According to these officials, their investigation, including the FBI, National Security Agency, and CIA, involves reviewing forensic evidence, including surveillance tapes from American embassies. Despite this, the officials concluded that the cause of the Havana Syndrome health incidents remain as mysterious now as they were a year ago.[16]

In January 2022, it was reported that a CIA task force in an interim report had determined that "Havana Syndrome" was not "the result of a sustained global campaign by a hostile power aimed at hundreds of US diplomats and spies." But in a couple of dozen instances, the report did not rule out foreign involvement, and other cases could not be resolved.[17]

Is Past Prologue? Russian Technological Attacks Date Back to 1953

In trying to evaluate the causes and sources behind these attacks, it might be instructive to look at the history of similar past actions against American officials during the Cold War. It is a fact that Soviet intelligence used then cutting-edge technology to irradiate the American

embassy in Moscow as part of eavesdropping operations. These are believed to have caused direct harm to the health of American citizens stationed there. Tragically, three US ambassadors to Moscow, whose offices were regularly radiated, died of cancer at early ages—Chip Bohlen at sixty-nine, Llewellyn Thompson at sixty-seven, and, after suffering from nausea and bleeding in his eyes, Walter Stoessel at sixty-six.

These attacks began in Moscow some seventy-one years ago, in 1953, and were eventually privately admitted to by Soviet officials. New York Times correspondent Bernard Gwertzman broke this story in an article on February 26, 1976, revealing that after fifteen years of denials, the Russians privately admitted to using microwaves to counter the array of listening devices on the roof, they have claimed. Gwertzman observed that the Russian action had irritated administration officials and produced diplomatic protests because of "possible damage to the health of American personnel from long periods of exposure to the low-level radiation. At first the microwaves came from a nearby building, but after that structure was torn down, they came from across Tchaikovsky Street, the large boulevard the embassy faces."[18]

Some embassy staff were aware of and concerned about the health effects resulting from the radiation they were being exposed to. One former embassy officer told the author, "I was assigned as an Assistant Army Attaché at the Moscow Embassy. My desk was directly in front of a window which had a large screen attached directly across the Ring Road from a KGB facility. Periodically, some type of technician would visit my desk and the screen covering the window. He would raise the screen and the dial on his meter would approach a [dangerously high] reading of 100; lowering the screen would return the needle to a Safe reading near Zero. He was measuring a microwave bombardment from the KGB facility across the street!"[19]

James Schumaker, a former Foreign Service Officer who served four tours of duty in Moscow and developed lymphocytic leukemia in 1985, believes that information on microwave attacks against the embassy was kept from the public because the longer the secrecy was maintained, the more difficult it was to break. Furthermore, with the advent of détente in the early 1970's, Schumaker reports that no one was looking for an obstacle to diplomatic progress.[20]

Irradiating the Vice President

No American officials, no matter how high ranking, were apparently immune from exposure. In July 1959, while Vice President Richard Nixon was visiting Moscow, the Russians subjected him and his wife Pat to dangerous ionizing radiation, bombarding the bedrooms at the American ambassador's residence known as Spaso House. These attacks are described in detail in declassified Secret Service documents obtained from the Nixon Presidential Library in California and released in September 2022 by the National Security Archive.

After the Secret Service “swept” the areas using equipment known as Radiac dosimeters, they detected the high levels of radiation. The agents, assuming the quarters were being bugged and that they were being overheard, loudly complained about “dirty tricks by their hosts.” The radiation quickly “settled down” to more normal levels—the first instance of effective action being taken to stop the attacks—and the last for a long time.

The discovery of the attacks was quickly followed by the coverup. The Secret Service account reports that US Ambassador to Moscow, Llewellyn Thompson, and Vice-Admiral Hyman Rickover, who accompanied Nixon, inexplicably decided “not to make this information known to the Vice President,” much less the American public. The secrecy of the specifics of this incident persisted until the Archive’s document release, which itself went largely unreported by the media. The outlines of the story of the Spaso House radiating incident remained secret for some seventeen years until Gwertzman’s February 1976 article.

The Archive releases recounted how a member of Nixon’s Secret Service team, James Golden, was spurred to action by his determination to see that the 1959 episode was included in the State Department’s investigation into the health effects of the microwave beams directed at the Embassy building. On April 28, 1976, he shared the secret history about the discovery of radiation at Spaso House with State Department Soviet Desk officials and medical officers.

According to Golden, he was later told that he had been exposed to “massive doses” of ionizing radiation emanating from an atomic battery that Soviet intelligence “used to power radio transmitters used for bugging purposes.”[21]

Secretary of State Kissinger Protests

Some sixteen years after Nixon’s visit, on December 9, 1975, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was finalizing his plans to visit Moscow for talks on arms control. On that day, he placed an “urgent” telephone call to the Soviet’s affable and popular ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin. Kissinger emphatically told him, “I want to talk to you about the signal. That beam you are beaming into our Embassy in Moscow … Maybe you could turn it off until I get there.”

Expressing concern that the Russians “could give [him] a radiation treatment,” Kissinger also expressed concern that the coverup was eroding, and warned Dobrynin that the microwaves could become a big obstacle to better relations between the two countries, saying, “We really are sitting on it here but too many people know about it … We will catch hell unless we can say something is happening to put an end to it.”

Transcripts of these conversations were released on September 13, 2022, after being obtained by the National Security Archive under the Freedom of Information Act. The National Security Archive notes that:

> "High-level US efforts to press Soviet leaders to halt the radiation activity began in 1967 and continued under four administrations into the Carter era. The microwave transmissions, believed to be related to bugging devices hidden in the Embassy walls, continued for decades after they were first detected when the US Chancery opened in the early 1950s."

Later, in December 1975, President Gerald Ford wrote to Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev, complaining that microwaves aimed at the embassy "pose unacceptable potential dangers to the health of our employees," as though the Soviets were unaware of the dangers.[22] Brezhnev responded, denying any malicious intent, and asserted that "the electromagnetic field in the area of the US Embassy in Moscow [was] of industrial origin." He insisted, with some accuracy, that the radiation was "several times lower than the standard officially recognized in the United States as not hazardous for human health."[23]

There were also secret and unsuccessful negotiations in early 1976 between high-level US and Soviet officials on the matter. These included talks between US Deputy National Security Adviser William Hyland and Soviet official Yuli Vorontsov discussing the possibility that the Soviets would "turn off their radiation" and both countries would take down their electronic surveillance "shacks" on the roofs of their respective embassies.[24]

The Archive notes that released documents show that "Soviet denial was part of a pattern: When the Ford and Carter administrations lodged protests about increased strength of the microwave radiation, top Soviet officials, including Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and Communist Party General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, stonewalled. According to a declassified telegram, Gromyko told US Ambassador Walter Stoessel in January 1976 that it was an 'imaginary issue.'"[25]

Prior to 1976, at least three American ambassadors, Foy Kohler, Jacob Beam, and Llewellyn Thompson, repeatedly protested the possible damage to the health of American personnel from long periods of exposure to low-level radiation.[26] It may well be that the microwave bombardment of the embassy began as a way to counter communications equipment on the roof, recharge Soviet listening devices, or disrupt American surveillance devices, like those listening in on the conversations of Soviet officials talking to each other while riding in their limousines. But once the Russians realized that the radiation was causing health effects—and their scientists have studied this extensively—they continued to radiate the embassy and began to weaponize the use of microwaves, developing smaller microwave transmitters that could be directed against individuals.

Conclusions

Currently, the interim report by the CIA on this mysterious malady is that Havana Syndrome is not the result of a sustained global campaign by a hostile power. Yet, according to some press reporting, Burns may have raised this issue twice with his Russian counterparts.[27] A few days later, The New York Times confirmed that during his trip to Moscow in 2021, Burns told Russian officials that any sort of operation that caused severe brain injuries for US personnel was out of bounds for Russia's spy services, and that there would be consequences if Russia is shown to be responsible, according to people briefed on the conversations. The Times further reported that it was the second time senior American officials have raised the issue with their Russian counterparts, who have consistently denied involvement. President Biden raised the issue with Putin in their Geneva summit earlier in 2021.[28]

In November 2022, Burns apparently made a second demarche on this issue to Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Chief Sergey Naryshkin during a meeting between them in Ankara, Turkey. No Havana Syndrome attacks have been publicly reported since that meeting.

Is this the end of such attacks? Officially, their source remains a mystery. But the historical record is clear—at one time during the Cold War, something very similar was done against American facilities and diplomats overseas. The Soviets weaponized the use of microwaves against American officials, which led to debilitating illnesses, and some US officials hid this truth for decades. This not only harmed the health of numerous officials serving in Moscow, but likely also weakened American deterrence and credibility during the Cold War. As for the modern-day spate of unexplained incidents known as Havana Syndrome, the mystery and controversy continue. A recent National Institute of Health study reported it found evidence of Havana Syndrome symptoms but could not find any evidence of MRI-detectable brain injury or biological abnormalities in its victims.[29] However, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence has also informed the Office of the Director of National Intelligence that it will conduct a formal investigation into how the Intelligence Community handled the inquiry into the incidents including any "improper suppression" of information about the incidents.[30] Time will tell if the past continues to be a prologue.

Update

On March 31, 2024, a joint, yearlong, extensively documented report by CBS' "60 Minutes," The Insider, and Der Spiegel, was broadcast and released, which "uncovered evidence suggesting that unexplained anomalous health incidents, also known as Havana Syndrome, may have their origin in the use of directed energy weapons." It describes new, heretofore unreported attacks on Americans, including a possible incident involving "a senior US Department of Defense official [who was] was targeted as recently as July 2023 at the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania," long after the attacks appeared to have been halted."

Lt. Colonel Greg Edgreen, who headed the Defense Intelligence Agency unit investigating Havana Syndrome, states that intelligence reports from various agencies conclusively implicate the Russians as being the source of the incidents. One of these reports include a US citizen victim's identification of a known Russian military intelligence officer, Albert Averyanov, the son of the deputy chief of Russian military intelligence, Andrey Averyanov, being outside her house in Tbilisi, Georgia at the very moment of an attack. Concluding the "60 Minutes" program, reporter Scott Pelley notes that the Director of National Intelligence, reflecting the administration's position, continues to maintain that "it is very unlikely that a foreign adversary is responsible" for the attacks.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a non-partisan organization that seeks to publish well-argued, policy-oriented articles on American foreign policy and national security priorities.

Image Credit: US State Department/Ron Przysucha

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Lewis Regenstein
Lewis Regenstein, an Atlanta writer and Charter Member of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers (AFIO), worked for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency during the 1960’s, in the Domestic Collection Service, which gathered intelligence from Americans who travelled abroad, resettled defectors, and provided operational support for the operations directorate.

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