

Anatomy of a conspiracy: With COVID, China took leading role | Associate Press

By Erika Kinetz

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BRUSSELS (AP) — The rumors began almost as soon as the disease itself. Claims that a foreign adversary had unleashed a bioweapon emerged at the fringes of Chinese social media the same day China first reported the outbreak of a mysterious virus.

“Watch out for Americans!” a Weibo user wrote on Dec. 31, 2019. Today, a year after the World Health Organization warned of an epidemic of COVID-19 misinformation, that conspiracy theory lives on, pushed by Chinese officials eager to cast doubt on the origins of a pandemic that has claimed more than 2 million lives globally.

From Beijing and Washington to Moscow and Tehran, political leaders and allied media effectively functioned as superspreaders, using their stature to amplify politically expedient conspiracies already in circulation. But it was China — not Russia — that took the lead in spreading foreign disinformation about COVID-19’s origins, as it came under attack for its early handling of the outbreak.

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