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R STREET POLICY STUDY NO. 164

February 2019

DISINFORMATION IN THE REAGAN YEARS AND LESSONS FOR TODAY¹

By Megan Reiss

INTRODUCTION

Relatively speaking, after the end of the Cold War, the United States appeared immune to Russia. Despite Russian military attacks against Estonia, Georgia, the Ukraine and others in the ensuing years, the United States was large and powerful, and any real, residual threat was neutralized when the Soviet Union dissolved. However, the end of the Cold War did not mean an end to history. And indeed, America's false sense of security was made apparent when Russia intervened in the November 2016 elections.

In hindsight, the United States should have expected that Russia would search for new purpose after its empire collapsed. The transition from superpower to "something else" was, in part, a search for Russian identity.² And although Russia has yet to settle on the principles of this new "nationhood," it has returned to two very old narratives: First, that

1. This is the first draft of a paper prepared as part of the University of Pennsylvania Law School Center for Ethics and the Rule of Law's Conference on "Democracy in the Crosshairs: Cyber Interference, Dark Money, and Foreign Influence," Nov. 1-3, 2018.

2. Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: The Rise of Putin and the Age of Fake News* (Penguin Books, 2017), pp. 217-27 and 265-70.

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America is an enemy; and second, that Russia is a "besieged fortress, surrounded by enemies."³

At least partially, Russian efforts to undermine the United States and the West in general are a predictable consequence of those narratives. With respect to the 2016 election, using disinformation as a primary means to sow derision has clear benefits for Russia in that it is effective and remarkably low cost.⁴ And, perhaps more importantly, modern Russia does not need to develop a new strategy for this kind of attack, as its Soviet predecessors left a well-developed playbook from which to borrow many methods and objectives.

Using these low-cost disinformation campaigns to divide America, undermine the West and undercut the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) effectively serves the greater purpose of increasing Russia's power relative to the West. Russian President Vladimir Putin and his circle are making use of the underlying nature of democracy to turn these objectives into reality. For example, people within democracies ultimately decide what happens in their societies, including the future of foreign and military policy.⁵ Accordingly, if it can successfully divide the people or persuade them to push for what are, in fact, Russian policy preferences, Russia may be able to gain power while weakening the United States.

Efforts to study Russia's recent attempts to conduct disinformation campaigns are already clarifying exactly how they take advantage of social media platform tools (like trending hashtags) to bolster their efforts.⁶ Yet, focusing on recent efforts alone may be insufficient, either to thoroughly analyze the recent disinformation campaigns or to identify new ones in their nascent stages. Indeed, along with academic analyses of previous Russian efforts, the large number of declassified archival documents, especially coming out of CREST—the

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 307 and 312-27.

4. See Michele A. Flournoy in Nicholas Burns et al., eds., *The World Turned Upside Down: Maintaining American Leadership in a Dangerous Age* (The Aspen Institute, 2017), pp. 177-79. For similar analysis from the early Cold War, see Harold D. Lasswell, "The Strategy of Soviet Propaganda," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science: The Defense of the Free World* 24:2 (January 1951), pp. 66-78. <http://media.leeds.ac.uk/papers/pmt/exhibits/2944/Lasswell2.pdf>.

5. Timothy P. McGeehan, "Countering Russian Disinformation," *Parameters* 48:1 (Spring 2018), p. 50. https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/issues/Spring_2018/8_McGeehan_CounteringRussianDisinformation.pdf.

6. Jared Prier, "Commanding the Trend Social Media as Information Warfare," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11:4 (Winter 2017), pp. 50-85. https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-11_Issue-4/Prier.pdf.

vault of declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) documents—reveals significant insights into the development and execution of historic Soviet disinformation campaigns that are relevant to Russian efforts today.

In view of this reality, the present study is comprised of three parts: First, it briefly reviews Russian disinformation efforts prior to the Cold War. It then examines a series of disinformation campaigns launched during the Reagan administration for lessons about why and how the Soviets executed them. And finally, it reviews lessons learned in an effort to inform today's response to recent Russian disinformation efforts.

One note before proceeding: This paper primarily uses the terms “disinformation and propaganda,” or just “disinformation,” in part, because this is the terminology the U.S. government uses to describe foreign government campaigns to manipulate information.⁷ Notably, these terms and others were also used during the Cold War. The Soviets themselves called it “dezinformatsiya,” which refers to techniques they used to get false information into the foreign media.⁸ Likewise, the State Department-led Active Measures Working Group that studied Soviet influence activities described propaganda as “information that reflects the perceptions or perspectives of a government,” which is spread through “deceptive operations that attempt to manipulate the opinions and/or actions of individuals, publics or governments.”⁹ Active measures of propaganda included “the use of front groups or the spread of disinformation (lies).”¹⁰

DISINFORMATION IN PERSPECTIVE

Attempts to alter public opinion or change the outcome of public decisions is a decidedly old phenomenon. From Themistocles' disinformation campaign in ancient Greece to Julius Caesar's use of symbols to manipulate populations in ancient Rome and Sun Tzu's lessons on manipulating the enemy in *The Art of War*, state actors have strategically employed propaganda and disinformation for millennia.¹¹

That said, it was during the twentieth century that an incredible surge in disinformation brought with it significant advancements in developing effective campaigns. An early and infamous example of Russian disinformation, the 1905 forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, provided fodder for deadly anti-Semitism policies in Russia and abroad.¹² Despite being exposed as a forgery in 1921, it still pops up as justification to oppose and oppress Jewish people today. This demonstrates the lifespan disinformation can have when it speaks to what people want to hear.

Yet, much of the early Soviet disinformation was borne out of real concerns about opposition movements in the wake of the Russian civil war that brought the Soviets to power.¹³ The 1920s saw a successful disinformation campaign with what the Soviet Union called TREST—a six-year deception operation that claimed monarchs were conspiring to take over the government. In fact, TREST was conceived by Soviet intelligence—the GRU—and was used to root out Soviet opponents.¹⁴ Historian Christopher Andrew argues that TREST and another early Soviet operation called SINDIKAT showed that the Soviets were more advanced in human intelligence operations than their Western counterparts; in fact, it was not until the British Double-Cross System that a Western state showed similar sophistication.¹⁵ While TREST and SINDIKAT fooled intelligence agencies in the West, both campaigns were geared primarily toward addressing immediate threats within the Soviet Union—which is to say that their primary focus was not to alter policies *abroad*.

During wartime, campaigns in the Soviet Union and the West became more sophisticated, targeting both troops in war and civilian populations in ways that hid their origin. Many of the actors participating in World War II, for example, engaged in disinformation of some sort. German broadcasts targeting U.S. civilians at home imitated domestic broadcasts as much as possible, even including faked commercials for Kellogg's Rice Krispies.¹⁶ However, it was the impact of Soviet efforts that made them remarkable. In fact, German leaders

7. See, e.g., the establishment of the Global Engagement Center aimed at exposing foreign propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Section 1287 of S. 2943, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, 114th Cong. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-114s2943enr/pdf/BILLS-114s2943enr.pdf>. See also, “Executive Order on Imposing Certain Sanctions in the Event of Foreign Interference in a United States Election,” The White House, Sept. 12, 2018. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-imposing-certain-sanctions-event-foreign-interference-united-states-election>.

8. Thomas Boghardt, “Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and its AIDS Disinformation Campaign,” *Studies in Intelligence* 53:4 (December 2009), pp. 1-2.

9. “Soviet Influence Activities: A Report on Active Measures and Propaganda, 1986-87,” U.S. Dept. of State, August 1987, p. iii.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion, 5th Edition* (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012), pp. 49-92.

12. The publication date is disputed. See, e.g., Svetlan Boym, “Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and The Protocols of Zion,” *Comparative Literature* 51:2 (Spring 1999), pp. 97-122. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1771244?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents; and Robert Singerman, “The American Career of the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion,’” *American Jewish History* 71:1 (September 1981), pp. 48-78. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23882005?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

13. Sarah Davies and James Harris, *Stalin's World: Dictating the Soviet Order* (Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 59-91.

14. Mikhail Agursky, “Soviet Disinformation and Forgeries,” *International Journal of World Peace* 6:1 (January-March 1989), pp. 13-14. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20751319?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents; see also, Christopher Andrew, *Secret World: A History of Intelligence* (Yale University Press, 2018), pp. 575-76.

15. Andrew, pp. 575-76.

16. Martin Ebon, *The Soviet Propaganda Machine* (McGraw Hill, 1987), pp. 292-93.

significantly underestimated the Soviet Union's intelligence and disinformation capabilities.¹⁷

Both the Germans and the Soviets attempted to send spies to infiltrate the ranks of their adversaries and to obtain information. The Germans sent out “tens of thousands” of agents, claiming after the war that an estimated 10 percent survived and sent back intelligence.¹⁸ However, with respect to disinformation, the Soviets had more success than any other country. Notably, they sent out false radio messages about the locations of their own tank, artillery and rifle divisions. In fact, they conducted 185 of these “radio games,” which were designed to cause misdirection and lull the Nazis into a false understanding of their military plans.¹⁹ What's more, the Soviets' prodigious efforts during the war meant there was a large number of people trained as “practitioners of aggressive counterintelligence” at the war's end—practitioners who would use the skills and successes they learned during wartime to apply similar techniques during peace.²⁰

In the wake of World War II, efforts to pursue broader geopolitical objectives through disinformation campaigns became more advanced and central to Soviet operations. Soon after the Nazi defeat, the narrative within the Soviet Union transitioned from countering German fascists to defeating American imperialists.²¹ In the early days of the Cold War, academics began analyzing Soviet disinformation efforts and found that the earliest goals were not to create a cohesive counter-narrative to the U.S. narrative of events but instead to capitalize on any event in a way that would build the power of the Soviets. Thus, Soviet efforts could swing wildly from one event to another. Their goals targeted their allies in ways that were designed to lull “[them] into complacency,” to “diver[t] [their] attention to a common enemy,” or to “fa[n] disunity,” all of which were ultimately intended to reduce the overall power of the West.²²

Efforts to undermine U.S. foreign policy abroad helped make certain that the United States was on the defensive and the Soviets pursued a variety of methods to make sure that was the case. One such method was through forgeries; the Soviets undertook the creation and dissemination of forged national security documents intended for consumption by foreign officials. Another was to spread misinformation on the ground in other nations. For example, if the United States

was attempting to act in another State—as was the case in the Persian Gulf in the 1980s—the Soviets would attempt to sow discord against the action and repeatedly bolster any continuing grievances against the United States.²³ To do so, they worked to ensure that a particular piece of disinformation would be repeated by leftists, front groups and revolutionary movements. In turn, those groups were expected to repeat that information until it was adopted by the local population. Once this was complete, the final step was to push these populations to confront leaders within the countries to pressure them not to support U.S. actions.²⁴

DECLASSIFIED: THE REAGAN YEARS

Although lessons on Soviet disinformation could be gathered from any point during the Cold War, the Reagan years are particularly instructive, given the administration's emphasis on analyzing and pushing back against Soviet disinformation. In 1981, the administration established the Active Measures Working Group to counter Soviet propaganda and then, in 1982, issued a presidential directive that included an order to review and counter Soviet disinformation campaigns.²⁵ Between 1985 and 1987, the administration took particular interest in these efforts, going as far as establishing a State Department Office of Disinformation, Analysis, and Response.²⁶

However, the work accomplished on Soviet disinformation may very well never have happened if concerned individuals had not intervened to take a strategic approach to active measures.²⁷ In the years before Reagan came into office, intelligence-community focus on Soviet disinformation was relatively weak.²⁸ In a recent interview, Dr. Kathleen Bailey, former head of the Active Measures Working Group, described the dynamics behind this lack of investment. She explained that, at the time, people in the District of Columbia were concerned about the United States' relationship with the Soviet

17. Tennent H. Bagley, *Spy Wars: Moles, Mysteries, and Deadly Games* (Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 112-17.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. Frederick C. Barghoorn, “What Russians Think of Americans,” *Foreign Affairs* 26:2 (January 1948), pp. 290-301. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1948-01-01/what-russians-think-americans>.

22. Lasswell, p. 71.

23. Dennis Ross, “The Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf,” *Political Science Quarterly* 99:4 (Winter 1984-1985), pp. 615-36. <https://www.psqonline.org/article.cfm?IDArticle=11709>.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 624-25. See also, George Lenczowski, “The Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf: An Encircling Strategy,” *International Journal of Soviet Foreign Policy* 37:2 (Spring 1982), pp. 310-12. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40202044?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

25. See generally, Fletcher Schoen and Christopher J. Lamb, *Deception, Disinformation, and Strategic Communications: How One Interagency Group Made a Major Difference* (National Defense University Press, June 2012). <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/ins/Strategic-Perspectives-II.pdf>. See also, Office of the Historian, “National Security Study Directive 11-82: U.S. Policy Toward the Soviet Union,” Document 204, Aug. 21, 1981 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981-1988, Soviet Union, January 1981-January 1983, Vol. III* (United States Government Publishing Office, 2016).

26. Bill Gertz, “U.S. begins new offensive on Soviet Disinformation,” *The Washington Times*, Oct. 6, 1986 (CREST, CIA-RDP90-00965R000302320015-9).

27. Roy S. Godson, “Disinformation: A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns,” Hearing Before the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 115th Congress, March 30, 2017.

28. Schoen and Lamb, pp. 12-25.

Union and were afraid that if they pointed out Soviet bad actions, they would interfere with that relationship. Additionally, there were no hard examples of Soviet disinformation that policymakers could point to that would pique the interest of either the press or the public in a way that would serve as a rallying cry to focus on addressing active measures. What's more, at the time, there was a general resistance to declassifying materials—not just because of the fear of exposing sources and methods but because of the time and resources it takes to do so. Public support to push back against active measures would not grow without access to information.²⁹

Instead, the push for the working group originally came from mid-level employees within the State Department who saw the destruction that Soviet disinformation caused. Those employees then got buy-in, first from Secretary of State Alexander Haig and eventually from then-Congressman Newt Gingrich, who acted as an advocate within Congress.³⁰

During the Reagan years, U.S. analysts emphasized that Soviet “propagandistic disinformation” generally sought to serve long-term Soviet interests.³¹ For instance, a State Department-led interagency working group report asserted that a range of documents were intended to persuade their consumers that “the U.S. will carry out foreign political, military, and economic activities in complete disregard of foreign public opinion and often at the expense of its allies around the world.”³²

In 1980, the CIA conservatively estimated that Soviet active measures like these cost the United States \$3 billion annually (over \$9 billion dollars in 2018).³³ This staggering amount is not surprising, considering that these efforts pushed narratives claiming that the United States was involved in assassinations, terrorism and destabilizing espionage operations.³⁴ They also asserted that the United States had caused both natural and manmade catastrophes.³⁵

29. Remarks of Kathleen C. Bailey in a telephone interview conducted by the author on Sept. 25, 2018.

30. Ibid.

31. Office of Soviet Analysis, “Letter to the Director of Central Intelligence Re: Some Highlights from the Airlie House Discussion on Disinformation,” Central Intelligence Agency, Aug. 12, 1985 (CREST, CIA-RDP89G01126R000100110022-3). These documents included everything from a faked National Security Council memo declaring that the United States intended to pursue nuclear first-strike capabilities, to a forged Zairian national-intelligence-service document indicating that the United States was supporting military training camps for African dissidents.

32. “Soviet Influence Activities,” p. 29.

33. Boghardt, p. 2.

34. Directorate of Intelligence, “Soviet Disinformation: Allegations of US Misdeeds,” Central Intelligence Agency, March 28, 1986 (CREST, CIA-RDP-86T01017R000100620001-1).

35. Ibid.

Although these campaigns were expensive to the United States then, today they can be quite valuable to Americans because analyzing them yields insight into their dissemination methods. Take, for instance, the Soviet effort to convince the Pakistanis that University of Maryland Medical Research Center scientists working in Pakistan were actually CIA scientists attempting to develop poisonous mosquitoes as a form of biological warfare. According to the story, the mosquitos were to be released to infect the nomads in their seasonal migration from Pakistan to Afghanistan.³⁶ This claim originally appeared in a Soviet newspaper, the *Literary Gazette*, which had a magazine correspondent who claimed that he toured the CIA lab himself.³⁷ The story was then widely disseminated in newspapers such as the Pakistani *Jang*, Lahore's weekly *Viewpoint*, *Times of India* and the Indian paper *The Patriot*.

The conspiracy relied on two major moves from the Soviet playbook. First, it incorporated some facts to make the report sound legitimate (for instance, the conspirators littered the articles with scientific research on malaria and mosquitoes.) What's more, it played to the existing fear of the CIA that permeated the developing world—specifically, that the agency was involved in nefarious biological experiments against vulnerable populations. And there is a decent chance that the campaign was successful: Although newspaper reports at the time could not definitively conclude the reasoning behind it, the lab's director had to leave the country when Pakistan refused to renew his visa.³⁸

Other Soviet efforts focused on altering world opinion on specific U.S. policies. During the Reagan years, the Soviets' most prodigious campaigns focused on arms control, opposing NATO and presenting the United States as an aggressor bent on major war. At their core, they focused on both undermining Western power and putting the Soviets in a better position militarily as compared to the West. They were rarely as blatantly absurd as the mosquito campaign, instead relying on and distorting Western documents and statements from officials, pushing out the narrative across multiple media platforms in the Soviet Union and abroad, and using those narratives to rally public opinion in the West and elsewhere to oppose the United States.

Take, for instance, Soviet active measures against NATO Theater Nuclear Forces (TNF) modernization that started during the Carter years and continued into the Reagan administration. The United States assessed that the Soviet

36. Office of Research, “Soviet Propaganda Alert No. 8,” International Communication Agency, June 8, 1982 (CREST, CIA-RDP83M00914R002100120034-3).

37. “Soviets buzz over ‘killer mosquitoes,’” *Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 4, 1982 (CREST, CIA-RDP90-00806R000201140093-1).

38. John Schidlovsky, “Mosquito Research Drew Soviet Attack,” *Baltimore Sun* (New Delhi Bureau), Feb. 9, 1982 (CREST, CIA-RDP90-00806R000201140092-2).

military strategy in Europe was that “if war breaks out, the Soviets should have, in their view, forces powerful enough to overrun NATO Europe quickly, before latent Western strength can be mobilized and brought to bear militarily.”³⁹ Many believed TNF modernization would solidify the alliance and hinder Soviet military objectives. In response, the Soviets launched a multi-year effort to foment public opposition to TNF modernization that focused on bolstering existing anti-nuclear civilian groups in the West by using front groups to organize demonstrations and conferences. They targeted their efforts to NATO countries where anti-nuclear sentiment was strongest.⁴⁰

Specific information campaigns related to U.S. military buildup and plans for nuclear use were described sometimes as a “distortion” instead of disinformation. As one “Soviet Propaganda Alert” described it, distortion was defined as a “one-sided and slanted presentation of information, insinuation and manipulation of the facts” rather than an “outright, blatant falsehood” (although the latter occurred as well).⁴¹ The Soviets tried to blur the truth to fit the narrative of the United States as an aggressive, imperialist nation. For instance, in 1982, upon learning that there was a Department of Defense directive on armed forces development over five years, the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS)—the centralized agency for collecting and dispersing news—disseminated a story declaring that the directive “provides for waging protracted nuclear war.” Another 1982 TASS story reported that “all military planning groups in the [United States]” were ordered to prepare for said war.⁴² While the U.S. military conducted long-term, strategic planning—including war planning—it was a serious distortion to indicate that its intentions at the time were to engage in nuclear war.

The Soviets also used anti-nuclear movements as a worldwide mouthpiece to counter U.S. policy. These efforts were primarily geared toward propaganda, providing a narrative for participants that the United States was set on nuclear war and that the Soviet Union was a peaceful nation building its defenses against an aggressor that sometimes used Soviet fronts to foment anti-American sentiment.

One method the Soviets pursued with respect to these anti-nuclear movements was the development of Soviet front groups. Some were overtly communist in nature but many had innocuous names that obscured their affiliation. They

would host conferences and protests that would draw persons not affiliated with the Soviets and then pursue overtly pro-Soviet themes. These conferences were predictable in nature. One of many instances occurred in October 1985, when the Australian affiliate of the World Peace Council (considered an international Soviet front organization) held an international conference that “attacked SDI [the Strategic Defense Initiative] and alleged U.S. development of a nuclear first-strike capability.”⁴³ The strategy was to organize a conference through a group directed by the Soviets, invite an international audience and then attribute goals to the United States that it did not have.

As the 1980s went on, the Soviets moved beyond their traditional front-group model by building off of a legitimate group’s anti-nuclear sentiment to create a more general anti-American sentiment. U.S. analysts concluded that Moscow saw its work in the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW)—which won the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize—as a model for how to accomplish this. It used the internal structure of the IPPNW, whereby the group was co-chaired by an American and a Soviet, to have the Soviet chair push (and obtain) the adoption of pro-Soviet arms control policies.⁴⁴ The IPPNW members also interacted frequently with front groups; the World Peace Council, for instance, instructed its member organizations to send all their physicians to the IPPNW conference. Affiliates of the IPPNW also intermingled among independent groups and communist groups. Between the legitimacy of the Nobel Peace Prize and the mixing of independent and front-organization members, the Soviets’ efforts within the IPPNW showed the possibilities that participating in groups chaired by Americans and Russians held for eventually proping up Soviet positions.

In addition to building support for their priorities in the anti-nuclear movement, the Soviets also used the movement to create a narrative about how the American people opposed the White House. Soviet newspapers declared that “America is literally on the boil and gripped by the antiwar movement,” and that the country was besieged by protestors holding “mass demonstrations [...] in Washington at the Pentagon’s walls.”⁴⁵ These reports were intended to discredit the United States and overstate internal opposition to American and NATO policies.⁴⁶

While the Soviet propagandists expressed frequent support

39. Bureau of Intelligence and Research, “Theater of Nuclear Forces Negotiations: The Initial Soviet Approach,” U.S. Dept. of State, Aug. 10, 1979. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb301/doc08.pdf>.

40. Bureau of Public Affairs, “Soviet Active Measures: Forgery, Disinformation, Political Operations,” U.S. Dept. of State, October 1981 (CREST, CIA_RDP-84B00049R001303150031-0).

41. “Soviet Propaganda Alert No. 8.”

42. Office of Research, “Soviet Propaganda Alert No. 10,” U.S. Information Agency, Sept. 30, 1982 (CREST, CIA-RDP83M00914R002100120030-7).

43. Directorate of Intelligence, “Worldwide Active Measures and Propaganda Alert,” Central Intelligence Agency, August 1986 (CREST, CIA-RDP-87T00685R000300420003-8). See also, Herbert Romerstein, “The World Peace Council and Soviet ‘Active Measures,’” The Hale Foundation, 1983 (CREST, CIA-RDP90-00806R000200720005-5).

44. “Worldwide Active Measures and Propaganda Alert (August 1986).”

45. “Soviet Propaganda Alert No. 8.”

46. Office of Research, “Soviet Propaganda Alert No. 13,” U.S. Information Agency, April 22, 1983 (CREST, CIA-RDP85M00364R001903760018-0).

for the anti-nuclear movements, they did not have total success in pushing the movement to support Soviet positions. Many prominent Western members of the anti-nuclear movement refused to attend the Prague Peace Assembly's "World Assembly for Peace and Life, Against Nuclear War." In the lead up to the assembly, delegates from the West were impeded from meeting with Charter 77 dissidents from Czechoslovakia.⁴⁷ Similar concerns appeared among otherwise "committed supporters" in the West over adherence to other forms of Soviet propaganda related to the Chernobyl disaster. For instance, the pro-Soviet Berlin Communist Party had members questioning the Soviet line on the disaster and asking for a broader discussion about how the accident would affect disarmament.⁴⁸ Soviet objectives for the peace movement stood in contrast to Soviet goals for suppressing Charter 77 dissent and any discussions on Chernobyl that did toe the party line—and persons who may have unwittingly been toeing the Soviet line—stood against them for their repressive actions. These episodes show that the Soviets sometimes overplayed their hand; because they had some control over the front groups, independence in the West could still win out if the talking points offered by the Soviets did not match reality.

However, the ideal case for policymakers to analyze in order to understand how the Soviets conducted disinformation campaigns is not the mosquito conspiracy or even the multi-pronged campaigns to undermine U.S. nuclear objectives. Rather, it is the highly successful attempt to link the United States to the development of AIDS. During the Reagan years, the epidemic was a central part of Soviet disinformation efforts. The story is fairly well known: The Soviets amplified a (completely unfounded) conspiracy that the AIDS virus was developed by American scientists intent on developing a biological weapon, claiming the scientists tested the weapon in Haiti on "drug addicts, homosexuals, and homeless persons in the U.S."⁴⁹ The conspiracy originally appeared in 1983, in India's pro-Soviet Union daily newspaper, *The Patriot*. The State Department assessed that the story was widely disseminated starting in 1985, in large part because TASS began pushing it out for reprint in many of the 126 countries in which it operated.⁵⁰ Notably, the United

States did not have similar bureaus in many of the developing countries to provide a factual counter-narrative.

While the AIDS conspiracy theory bolstered suspicion of the United States abroad, the Soviets also tried to target the U.S. national security apparatus. TASS and other Soviet publications produced articles that linked U.S. military bases to the spread of AIDS in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Kenya, Zaire and Latin America.⁵¹ *The Patriot* accused the Defense Department of circulating AIDS in Africa to strategically depopulate certain countries like Zaire.⁵² Leaflets even "appeared" in West Germany that offered free AIDS testing at a U.S. Army hospital in Berlin. Subsequent leaflets then announced that the hospital could no longer treat civilians because it was overflowing with AIDS victims.⁵³ During a time when AIDS was still misunderstood and thus fear was still the overwhelming response to the virus, the Soviets took advantage of the confusion to sow conspiracies.

Such efforts were sophisticated, combining many of the typical Soviet measures of the time. In fact, this kind of disinformation was actually part of a broader Soviet effort since the end of WWII to link the United States to biological weapons testing. Often (but not always), these conspiracies claimed the CIA was conducting testing on vulnerable populations. The AIDS conspiracy blamed the United States for a natural catastrophe—the spread of a then-deadly disease. It also implicated the CIA—a reliable boogeyman—and spread fear that U.S. testing was designed to target people in developing countries. This undermined international support for U.S. bases abroad. But most significantly, the Soviets relied on fear and echo chambers to spread the idea that the United States had nefarious intentions and accidentally released an evil that had spun out of its control.

Despite its effectiveness, in October 1987, the Soviets' AIDS disinformation campaign abruptly ended. At a three-day summit, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev angrily confronted U.S. Secretary of State George P. Shultz over the Active Measures Working Group's report that detailed various Soviet disinformation campaigns, arguing that it went counter to his glasnost campaign to make the Soviet government more transparent. Even though Shultz had not even read the report, he did not apologize to the Soviet leader. Instead, he declared that the AIDS campaign in particular was "bum dope."⁵⁴ At the end of the summit, the Soviet Union promised to end such efforts.⁵⁵

47. Office of Research, "Soviet Propaganda Alert No. 15," U.S. Information Agency, July 25, 1983 (CREST, CIA-RDP85M00364R001903760006-3). See also, Emily Tamkin, "In Charter 77, Czech Dissidents Chart New Territory," *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 3, 2017. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/03/in-charter-77-czech-dissidents-charted-new-territory>.

48. "Worldwide Active Measures and Propaganda Alert (August 1986)."

49. "Soviet Influence Activities," pp. 33-43. See also, Linda Qui, "Fingerprints of Russia Disinformation: From AIDS to Fake News," *The New York Times*, Dec. 12, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/us/politics/russian-disinformation-aids-fake-news.html>; Office of Research, "Soviet Propaganda Alert No. 29," U.S. Information Agency, Nov. 15, 1985 (CREST, CIA-RDP87M00539R002404010003-5).

50. Directorate of Intelligence, "The Soviet Foreign Propaganda Apparatus: A Research Paper," Central Intelligence Agency, April 1986, p. iii (CREST, CIA-RDP-87T00787R000200170003-4). For an analysis of TASS, see Ebon, p. 169.

51. Boghardt, p. 14.

52. Ibid.

53. "Soviet Influence Activities," pp. 39-40.

54. Schoen and Lamb, p. 6.

55. Ibid.

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Recent Russian disinformation efforts borrow many elements of these Cold War-era campaigns. In his late-Cold War analysis of the KGB and the CIA, political scientist Edward Jay Epstein argued that:

[A]dversaries can be expected to constantly attempt through peaceful means to disrupt each other's economic and military alliances, misdirect each other's energy on chimerical projects, and undermine each other's political and moral authority. Victory will come not from any single decisive battle but from the accumulation of gradual changes in the global balance of power.⁵⁶

Much like when the Soviet Union targeted states where anti-NATO sentiment was strongest, Russia is currently focusing on and trying to exploit existing weaknesses. Today, Russian state-propaganda is run through television and newspapers, including *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, both of which have bureaus across the globe that attempt to accomplish their work by undermining accurate versions of stories. Like their Cold War predecessors, they continue to fall back on many of the classic conspiracies and update them for consumption today.

Take, for instance, the Russian conspiracy that the CIA was linked to the Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 crash over the Ukraine. The Russian television network *Channel One* claimed that the CIA helped the Ukrainian government down the plane as part of a broader effort to hurt the Russian economy, and then claimed that the CIA planned a similar effort during the Cuban Missile Crisis.⁵⁷ Like previous attempts, the conspiracy draws on the ongoing distrust of the CIA, connects it to a historical event through an unfounded assertion and then uses the conspiracy to undermine Western objectives—in this case, in the Ukraine.

Similarly, as in the case with the AIDS and mosquito conspiracies, efforts to link the United States to biological-weapons use and to implicate the CIA in all things nefarious were revived when, in 2009, the Russian newspaper *Pravda* printed stories claiming the CIA was conducting secret testing in Mexico and Georgia, and that the Defense Department was preparing biological weapons for the purpose of pinning their development on Iran.⁵⁸ Since then, *Pravda* has published similar conspiracy theories, such as the 2012/13 idea that the CIA may be using biological or other weapons

56. Edward Jay Epstein, *Deception: The Invisible War Between the KGB and the CIA* (Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 230.

57. Taylor Wofford, "Russian State Media says CIA shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17," *Newsweek*, July 22, 2014. <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-state-media-says-cia-shot-down-malaysian-airlines-flight-mh-17-260381>.

58. Milton Leitenberg et al., *The Soviet Biological Weapons Program* (Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 407-22.

against revolutionary leaders in Latin America to induce cancer.⁵⁹ This, too, attempted to undermine the Defense Department, implicate the CIA and use "analysis" that appeared scientific in nature, and then claimed that the United States was using nefarious means to violate the will of the people in developing countries.

While these campaigns track to their historic predecessors, there are differences between the Soviet's Cold War efforts and Russia's recent ones. One major one is that current efforts are far less likely to be pushing a pro-Russia narrative alongside the campaign—as was typical in the anti-nuclear efforts—in order to undermine the United States. Today, stoking tensions is their primary aim.⁶⁰ For example, Facebook advertisements that were purchased as part of the Russian election disinformation campaign primarily amplified existing tensions by dealing with issues like Black Lives Matter, vaccines, immigration and gay rights.⁶¹ These issues may have further divided the United States but they did not necessarily serve to push populations toward a pro-Russia policy. Put simply, division—rather than policy—appears to be Russia's key objective.

Yet, given that the Russians are following much of the Cold War playbook for disinformation—even if they do not always have the same objectives—one might ask if there are lessons from the Cold War that could inform how Americans can counter their efforts. And indeed, the Active Measures Working Group holds a few, as analyzing and then shedding light on these campaigns was a key part of their strategy. As such, similar efforts could still be of value.⁶²

In terms of lessons learned that could be applied today, the first is that during the Cold War, outing Soviet conspiracies as such prevented them from being adopted.⁶³ Therefore, increasing efforts to identify Russian disinformation campaigns while they are still in their nascent stages may become an effective countermeasure. Ideally, this would include disseminating the origins of the disinformation, an outline of

59. See, e.g., Dmitry Sudakov, "CIA infects South American leaders with cancer?" *Pravda*, Jan. 5, 2012. http://www.pravdareport.com/world/120158-south_america; Peter Baofu, "The death of Hugo Chavez, and the trend of hi-tech assassinations in global politics," *Pravda*, March 11, 2013. http://www.pravdareport.com/opinion/124025-hugo_chavez_eath.

60. Nina Jankowicz, "The Disinformation Vaccination," *The Wilson Quarterly* 42:1 (Winter 2018).

61. Ibid. See also, Lorenzo Franceschi-Bicchieri, "Here Are 14 Facebook and Instagram Ads that Russian Trolls Bought to Divide America," *Motherboard*, Nov. 1, 2017. https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/a377ej/facebook-instagram-russian-ads; Tony Romm, "Thousands of Facebook ads bought by Russian Trolls released," *The Mercury News*, May 10, 2018. <https://www.mercurynews.com/2018/05/10/thousands-of-facebook-ads-bought-by-russian-trolls-released>.

62. Schoen and Lamb, pp. 60-61. See also, Burns, p. 183.

63. Directorate of Intelligence, "Worldwide Active Measures and Propaganda Alert," Central Intelligence Agency, February 1987 (CREST, CIA-RDP-88T00986R000100010001-2).

the associated Russian goals and associated analyses of who or what Russia planned to target.

Second, declassified documents from the Active Measures Working Group also assert that highlighting “Soviet manipulation of dialogue groups such as the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War” proved to be effective.⁶⁴ From amplifying anti-war rhetoric during Vietnam to pushing the nuclear freeze narrative during the Reagan years, the Soviets hoped to divide the United States further on issues that were already contentious. It should be noted that most people involved in protests then were neither communists nor “witting tools” of the Soviets.⁶⁵ And today, despite targeted Russian efforts to stoke Facebook conspiracies, such is also true of groups like Black Lives Matter. For this reason, identifying and publicizing Russian efforts to fan the flames of existing division may be necessary to ensure that the U.S. constitutional right to protest is preserved without being manipulated by nefarious state actors.

Of particular note, Cold War assessments of propaganda efforts in the developing world concluded that attempts to counter these crude efforts did not necessarily have to come from sophisticated countermeasures but rather, that timely recognition of the problem and persistence in highlighting and correcting the disinformation were quite effective.⁶⁶ If we are to heed this lesson today, the United States will need to devise a targeted, continual effort—and to invest in the manpower necessary—to analyze and correct disinformation on an ongoing basis and in real time.

Finally, policymakers may find value in selectively confronting Russian leadership on particular efforts. Shultz called out Gorbachev for Soviet disinformation on AIDS, which led to an actual draw-down of the active measures. This may be dependent upon personalities, other geopolitical objectives and relationships but in select circumstances, disinformation may best be confronted through diplomacy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan Reiss is a National Security and Cybersecurity Senior Fellow at the R Street Institute, where she writes about cybersecurity and other pressing national security issues. She is also a senior editor of *Lawfare* and a visiting fellow at the National Security Institute at George Mason University’s Antonin Scalia Law School. Prior to joining R Street, Dr. Reiss was a senior national security fellow for U.S. Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska.

64. Ibid.

65. “Intelligence Report,” *American Bar Association Standing Committee on Law and National Security* 3:4 (April 1981) (CREST, CIA-RDP90-00806R000100080021-9).

66. “Worldwide Active Measures and Propaganda Alert” (February 1987).

