

Dismiss, Distort, Distract, and Dismay: Continuity and Change in Russian Disinformation

Issue 2016/13 · May 2016

by Jon White

Context and importance

Russian disinformation has generated considerable interest over the last decade, and especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. NATO Commander General Philip Breedlove said that Russia today is waging "the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare."¹

Despite General Breedlove's assertion, continuity rather than change characterises Russia's current disinformation operations. The German webpage, Deutsche Welle, noted the recent Russian propaganda push is "reminiscent of the Cold War KGB efforts."² Anton Nosik, a popular Russian blogger, says, "the Kremlin is falling back on a time-honoured strategy in its propaganda war."³ Russian observer Maria Snegovaya says that current Russian information warfare is "fundamentally based on older, well-developed and documented Soviet techniques."⁴ Emphasising the Soviet roots of today's Russian disinformation, Snegovaya argues that "the novelty of Russia's information warfare is overestimated."⁵

Critical overview of policies

Defining the topic is key to a critical appraisal of the policy. Active measures, reflexive control, propaganda and disinformation are inter-related disciplines. Active measures in the Soviet era included reflexive control, media manipulation, forgeries and occasional murders.⁶ Disinformation plays a role in all of these. Russian observer Timothy Thomas defines reflexive control as "a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action."⁷ Czech defector Ladislav Bittman defined disinformation as "a carefully constructed false message leaked into an opponent's communication system to deceive the decision-making elite or the public."⁸ Richard Schultz and Roy Goodson, in *Dezinformatsia*, emphasise covert disinformation, something Russia still uses today.⁹ Russia seeks not so much to leverage its disinformation to convince, but to use it to "pollute" the information environment and thus create enough doubt to momentarily paralyse decision-makers when evaluating Russia's actions.

The Soviet experience with disinformation can be divided into two theatres: offensive disinformation, which sought to influence decision-makers and public opinion abroad and defensive, which sought to influence Soviet citizens. This study will examine Soviet offensive and defensive disinformation and compare it to Russian offensive and defensive disinformation.

Russian disinformation is not new. It demonstrates more continuity than change from its Soviet antecedents. The most significant changes are the lack of a universal ideology and the evolution of means of delivery. Putin's *Russkii mir* (Russian World) is not as universal in its appeal as Soviet communism was. On the other hand, Russia has updated how it disseminates its disinformation. The Soviet experience with disinformation can be divided into two theatres: offensive disinformation, which sought to influence decision-makers and public opinion abroad and defensive, which sought to influence Soviet citizens. This study will examine Soviet offensive and defensive disinformation and compare it to Russian offensive and defensive disinformation.

Soviet offensive disinformation involved planting falsehoods believable only by those predisposed to believe in conspiracy theories, or tricking those inimical to Soviet interests. An example will illustrate the nature of Soviet disinformation. A Soviet disinformation operation called Operation Infektion was both of long duration and quite successful. This operation was intended to plant the lie that AIDS had been developed by the CIA. In this case, the story was planted in an obscure Indian newspaper. The KGB fed Dr. Jakob Segal the idea, and encouraged him to spread the story. Segal played to perfection the role Lenin described as being a "useful idiot," maintaining the story even after Soviet authorities publicly denied the truth of it.¹⁰ Here is a key difference between Soviet disinformation and today's Russian disinformation: ultimately, Soviets would defend the truth, when Soviet policy required it.

A second offensive disinformation technique was murder of opponents overseas. Assassinations abroad had disinformational components. For example, the NKVD famously killed Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1940 and the KGB killed Ukrainian dissidents Lev Rebet and Stepan Bandera in West Germany in 1957 and 1959,¹¹ and Romanian dissident Noel Bernard in 1981.¹² The KGB apparently kidnapped or killed Nikolai Artamonov-Shadrin, a Soviet defector, in Austria in 1975, which

had a clear informational message to prospective defectors: "do not double cross the Soviets, or you'll end up like Shadrin." Cleverly, it had a double benefit, the Soviet magazine *Literaturnaya Gazeta* alleged that the CIA had killed Shadrin because he wanted to return to the USSR.¹³ Thus, gullible people in the USSR would believe the CIA had killed a man just because he wanted to go home, and cynical observers, who knew the KGB's ways, would get the reverse message: the KGB pays back those who cross them.¹⁴

Soviet defensive disinformation also consisted of less violent means. The Soviets were intent on propagandising the Soviet population. To keep out alternative news, the Soviets periodically jammed Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.¹⁵ The Soviet citizenry were quite cynical about their government's disinformation, however. The two most important Soviet newspapers were *Pravda* (Truth) and *Izvestia* (News). Soviets would joke that there was no news in Truth and no truth in News.¹⁶

Continuity between the Soviet era and today should hardly surprise us. Litvenenko and Felshtinsky show that even though the KGB was outlawed in the Russian Federation, the operators remained and merely changed the name of the organisation for which they worked. Putin himself is acknowledged to be a KGB veteran, and "siloviki" (security force veterans) wield enormous influence in Putin's Russia.¹⁷

The continuities of today's Russian offensive disinformation are noteworthy. Snegovaya argues that "[t]he main principles and approaches the Russian government utilises [in disinformation] today were taken from Soviet toolkits."¹⁸ Ben Nimmo characterises them as "dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay."¹⁹ When information inimical to Russian interests appears, Russian leaders dismiss it. See, for example, early Russian denials that Russian soldiers were involved in Crimea. If the information persists, Russian spokesmen distort it. Russia belatedly admitted that Russians are in Crimea, but they had been soldiers already legally stationed there or later, in Donbas, were "volunteers." If the derogatory information still remains, the Russian solution is to distract attention away. In Ukraine, Russia repeatedly distracted attention from their invasion of Donbas with the stories that "Ukrainians are fascists." If all else fails, a Russian public figure will issue some public statement designed to dismay the audience abroad. Russian "Doctor of Military Science,"²⁰ Konstantin Sivkov suggested Russia consider using nuclear weapons to set off the Yellowstone super-volcano or trigger the San Andreas fault.²¹

One discontinuity today, however, is that Russians do not aim to preserve the credibility of the Russian government's narrative in Western eyes.²² If Russian disinformation can convince some westerners of the truth of Russian disinformational themes, so much the better, but Russia will settle for a more modest goal. They want to undermine the credibility of the media, especially the internet, as a medium itself in western eyes. Russian blogger Anton Nosik calls this "internet pollution."²³ The Russian government aims for the more modest goal of making people abroad believe that the internet is simply informational chaos, utterly unreliable. A quick survey of the comments section of almost any on-line story involving Russia will demonstrate the truth of this. Russia-watcher Catherine Fitzpatrick, says "trolls inhibit informed debate by using crude dialogue to change 'the climate of discussion.'" Fitzpatrick observes that "if you show up at The Washington Post or New Republic sites, where there's an article that's critical of Russia, and you see that there are 200 comments that sound like they

were written by 12-year-olds, then you just don't bother to comment."²⁴ Peter Pomerantsev says, "the point of this new propaganda is not to persuade anyone, but to keep the viewer hooked and distracted—to disrupt Western narratives rather than provide a counternarrative."²⁵ This is different from the Cold War during which the Soviet actually tried to convince foreign audiences.

Today's *Russkii Mir* is smaller than the Soviet world. Soviet communist and anti-imperialist ideology, in its heyday, sold well in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America in a way that Putin's pan-Slavism does not. The *Russkii Mir* does not go far beyond the borders of the old Soviet Union. While anti-imperialism is widespread today, it is diffused, ideologically less coherent than Soviet communism, and more difficult for the Russian government to sell itself as genuinely anti-imperialist, especially when the Russian Federation is pretty clearly engaging in imperialism in Donbas, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Even the security forces operate in a more restricted area. In the Cold War, the KGB was happy to kill dissidents abroad. Today's FSB henchmen generally restrict their killings of opposition figures to the Russian territory.²⁶ This is a key difference from the Soviet era.

In defensive terms, Russia also follows Soviet traditions, albeit with new technology. Instead of jamming foreign radio broadcasts, the Russian government attempts to block internet protocol addresses.²⁷ Most Russians get their news from television and most of them believe what they see.²⁸ Putin and his friends own most Russian media.²⁹ The Russian government owns Russia One and a 51% interest in Channel One. Gazprom owns NTV.³⁰ The key difference between the Cold War and today is the credibility Russians attach to their own media.³¹

In the near abroad, Russian propaganda in the Russian language targets Russian speakers. At times Russian media does not just "spin" the truth. It creates a whole new reality.³² For example, Russian news media presented the story that a Russian boy had been crucified in Slaviansk. Yevgeny Feldman of *Novaya Gazeta* and Alan Cullison of *The Wall Street Journal* were in Sloviansk shortly after the incident and found neither evidence nor witnesses.³³ When confronted with the truth, a Russian official responded that ratings were what matters.³⁴

Recommendations

The European Union's External Action Service East Strategic Communications Task Force produces a weekly Strategic Communications Russian Disinformation Digest. This is an excellent input into a western response to Russian disinformation. The EU should more widely publicise this product.

Russians in the former Soviet Union generally turn to Russian language media for news. Too often, this means media with the Kremlin viewpoint. Latvia and Estonia have both have started broadcasting in the Russian language to the portions of their populations that speak only or primarily Russian. The government of the Netherlands is helping fund independent Russian-language journalism.³⁵ This is a positive development and should be continued and expanded, if possible. This may be an opportunity for pooling and sharing of resources.

Unilateral national Strategic Communications or "Influence Operations" policies are of limited use. Russia has unity of effort in its disinformation programme. A series of western national responses may be disjointed, uncoordinated and ultimately of limited effect. NATO has a Strategic Communications Centre of

Excellence, but it lacks "teeth." To be effective, strategic communications, or at least their themes and messages, must be noticed by target audiences. To be noticed requires "influence operations forces," a group of people and or organisations whose job it is to get the truth of the western perspective out there. The Russian government does this for the purposes of disinformation with the trolls of the Internet Research Agency,³⁶ and volunteers from various Russian nationalist organisations.³⁷ NATO should do this, in Russian and on Russian media, for the purposes of good. This may not be easy. Russian trolls spread "internet pollution" around the web, but the West has the advantage of having truth on its side.

Finally, the Alliance (or its member nations) needs to have a non-attributable influence operations capability. The Russian government wants to limit access of Russian citizens to any but the Kremlin narrative. They have even gone so far as to ban foreign ownership of media.³⁸ To be attributable to the West means perhaps being banned by the Russian government. In such an environment, non-attributable influence operations, to get alternative views to Russian citizens, may be the only way to get alternative views of current events to Russians.

Russian disinformation relies heavily on its Soviet antecedents. The Russian government has, however, updated its means of delivery and isolating Russians from outside views. Defeating today's Russian disinformation requires a coordinated and pervasive response. It can be defeated, but this will require persistence.

Footnotes

¹Peter Pomerantsev, "Russia and the Menace of Unreality," *The Atlantic*, 9 September 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/russia-putin-revolutionizing-information-warfare/379880/>, accessed 4 April 2016.

²Deutsche Welle, "German Media Worries about Russia Disinformation Program," *Deutsche Welle*, <http://www.dw.com/en/german-media-worries-about-russian-led-disinformation-campaign/a-19061955>, accessed 23 March 2016.

³Daisy Sindelar, "The Kremlin's Troll Army: Moscow Is Financing Legions of Pro-Russian Internet Commenters. But How Much Do They Matter?" *The Atlantic*, 12 August 2014 <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/the-kremlins-troll-army/375932/>, accessed 1 April 2016.

⁴Maria Snegovaya, "Putin's Information War in Ukraine: The Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare," *Institute for the Study of War, Russia Report 1*, September 2015, 9.

⁵Snegovaya, 21.

⁶Active measures "include a broad range of secret operations involving disinformation; black propaganda; forgeries; rulers; use of front organizations; influence agents: exploitation of foreign academic, economic, or scientific elites; clandestine broadcasting; paramilitary operations and deception; support of guerrilla groups: and such terrorist activities as kidnappings and murders." Ladislav Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation*, (Washington: Pergamon-Brassy's 1985), 43-44.

⁷Timothy Thomas, "Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 17, 237.

⁸Bittman, 49.

⁹Richard Schultz and Roy Goodson, in *Dezinformatsia*, (Washington: Pergamon-Brassy's, 1984) 38.

¹⁰Thomas Borgardt, "Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign," *Studies in Intelligence*, December 2009, 7-12, 17-18. See also, *United States Department of State, Soviet Influence Activities: A Report on Active Measures and Propa-*

ganda, 1986-87, (Washington: United States Department of State, 1987), 33-42.

¹¹Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB*. (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 361-362, and Bittman, 38.

¹²Ion Mihai Pacepa and Ronald J. Rychlak, *Disinformation*, (Washington: WND Books, 2013), 29.

¹³Bittman, 158.

¹⁴Robert G. Kaiser, "A Non-fiction Spy Story with No Ending, Just loose Ends," *Washington Post*, 17 July 1977, p. A8-9.

¹⁵Philip Shenon, "Years of Jamming Voice of America Halted by Soviet," *New York Times*, 26 May 1987; Serge Schmemann, "Soviet Union Ends Years of Jamming of Radio Liberty," *New York Times*, 1 December 1988.

¹⁶Geneva Overholser, "The Editorial Notebook; Dear Pravda," *New York Times*, 12 May 1987.

¹⁷Alexander Litvenenko and Yuri Felshinsky, *Blowing Up Russia: The Secret Plot to Bring Back KGB Terror*. (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), xxii - xxiv.

¹⁸Snegovaya, 13.

¹⁹<http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/anatomy-info-war-how-russias-propaganda-machine-works-and-how-counter-it>, accessed 11 May 2016. US Ambassador to Germany John B. Emerson, used the same construct in his speech "Exposing Russian Disinformation," *Atlantic Council Blog*, June 29, 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/exposing-russian-disinformation>, accessed 23 March 2016.

²⁰Russian Defense Academy, like its Soviet antecedents, awards degrees in the field.

²¹Konstantin Sivkov, "Nuclear Spetsnaz," *Military Industrial Courier*, 25 March 2015, <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/24405>, accessed 13 April 2016.

²²Angus Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*, (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 185. Roxburgh tells of how Russian officials believed that western journalists wrote whatever their proprietors (or governments wanted), and could not understand the idea of an independent media.

²³Sindelar.

²⁴Sindelar.

²⁵Pomerantsev.

²⁶Alexander Litvenenko in London and Mikhail Lesin, founded dead in Washington, however, are obvious exceptions. Andrea Noble, "Blunt Force Trauma Killed 'Russia Today' Founder Found in D.C. Hotel: Medical Examiner." *Washington Times*, 10 March 2016; see also John R. Schindler, "Another Defector Dead in Washington." *Washington Observer*, 16 March 2016.

²⁷Paul Goble, "Moscow Now Seeking to Ban Means Russians Use to Get Around Its Blocking of Web Sites," *Window on Eurasia*, 1 August 2015, <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2015/08/moscow-now-seeking-to-ban-means.html>, accessed 5 April 2016.

²⁸Paul Goble, "Despite Internet, Moscow TV Sets Agenda for Russians, Levada Center Says," *The Interpreter*, June 23, 2014.

²⁹Roxburgh, 56-63, 292.

³⁰"BBC Russia Profile - Media," <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17840134>, accessed 6 April 2016.

³¹The level of trust, is, however, waning. See Paul Goble, "Russians Still Get News From TV But Trust It Far Less Than They Did, Gudkov Says," *The Interpreter*, 21 February 2016, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russians-still-get-news-from-tv-but-trust-it-far-less-than-they-did-gudkov-says/>, accessed 18 April 2016.

³²Pomerantsev. See also, Paul Goble, "Soviets Only Censored Reality; Putin Creates an Alternative One, Ikhlov Says," *Window on Eurasia*, 15 August 2015, <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2015/08/soviets-only-censored-reality-putin.html>, accessed 5 April 2016.

³³"State-Run News Station Accused of Making Up Child Crucifixion," *Moscow Times*, 14 July 2014. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/state-run-news-station-accused-of-making-up-child-crucifixion/503397.html>, accessed 5 April 2016.

³⁴Pomerantsev.

³⁵See the Dutch government press release, <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2015/11/19/the-netherlands-to-support-independent-russian-language-media>, accessed 13 April 2016.

³⁶Adrian Chen, "The Agency," *New York Times Magazine*, 2 June 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html?_r=0, accessed 6 April 2016.

³⁷Jolanta Darczewska hints that Aleksander Dugin has ideological (and presumably pro bono) on-line trolls and that "their online actions are extremely dynamic, aggressive and uncompromising." Jolanta Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimean Operation, A Case Study*, (Warsaw: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 2014), 29.

³⁸Paul Goble, "Russia May Soon Have 'More Blocked Websites than Working Ones,' *Legal Expert Says*," *Window on Eurasia*, 10 April 2015.

References

Andrew, Christopher and Vasili Mitrokhin. *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB*. (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

British Broadcasting Corporation, "BBC Russia Profile – Media," <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17840134>, accessed 6 April 2016.

Bittman, Ladislav. *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation*. (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1985).

Borgardt, Thomas. "Soviet Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign." *Studies in Intelligence*, December 2009.

Chen, Adrian. "The Agency." *New York Times Magazine*, 2 June 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html?_r=0, accessed 6 April 2016

Darczewska, Jolanta. *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimean Operation, A Case Study*. (Warsaw: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 2014).

Deutsche Welle. "German Media Worries about Russia Disinformation Program." Deutsche Welle, <http://www.dw.com/en/german-media-worries-about-russian-led-disinformation-campaign/a-19061955>, accessed 23 March 2016.

Emerson, John B. "Exposing Russian Disinformation." *The Atlantic Council Blog*. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/exposing-russian-disinformation>, accessed 23 March 2016.

Goble, Paul. "Despite Internet, Moscow TV Sets Agenda for Russians, Levada Center Says," *The Interpreter*, June 23, 2014.

Goble, Paul. "Moscow Now Seeking to Ban Means Russians Use to Get Around Its Blocking of Web Sites," *Window on Eurasia*, 1 August 2015, <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2015/08/moscow-now-seeking-to-ban-means.html>, accessed 5 April 2016.

About the author



Jon White is a retired US Army officer. He has been a student of Eastern Europe since the 1980s. He is pursuing a PhD in history at the University of Alabama and is currently an instructor at the NATO Special Operations School in Belgium.

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the view of NATO or NSOS.

Goble, Paul. "Russians Still Get News From TV But Trust It Far Less Than They Did, Gudkov Says." *The Interpreter*, 21 February 2016. <http://www.interpretermag.com/russians-still-get-news-from-tv-but-trust-it-far-less-than-they-did-gudkov-says/>, accessed 18 April 2016.

Goble, Paul. "Soviets Only Censored Reality; Putin Creates an Alternative One, Ikhlov Says," *Window on Eurasia*, 15 August 2015, <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2015/08/soviets-only-censored-reality-putin.html>, accessed 5 April 2016.

Litvenenko, Alexander and Yuri Felshtinsky. *Blowing Up Russia: The Secret Plot to Bring Back KGB Terror*. (New York: Encounter Books, 2007)

Nimmo, Ben. "Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia's Propaganda Machine Works, And How to Counter It." <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/anatomy-info-war-how-russias-propaganda-machine-works-and-how-counter-it>, accessed 11 May 2016.

Noble, Andrea. "Blunt Force Trauma Killed 'Russia Today' Founder Found in D.C. Hotel: Medical Examiner." *Washington Times*, 10 March 2016.

Overholser, Geneva. "The Editorial Notebook; Dear Pravda," *New York Times*, 12 May 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/12/opinion/the-editorial-notebook-dear-pravda.html?pagewanted=1>, accessed 4 April 2016.

Pacepa, Ion Mihai and Ronald J. Rychlak. *Disinformation: Former Spy Chief Reveals Secret Strategies for Undermining Freedom, Attacking Religion and Promoting Terrorism*. (Washington: WND Books, 2013).

Pomerantsev, Peter. "Russia and the Menace of Unreality How Vladimir Putin is Revolutionizing Information Warfare." *The Atlantic*, 9 September 2014.

Roxburgh, Angus. *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*, (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012).

Schindler, John R. "Another Defector Dead in Washington." *Washington Observer*, 16 March 2016.

Schmemmann, Serge. "Soviet Union Ends Years of Jamming of Radio Liberty," *New York Times*, 1 December 1988.

Schultz, Richard H. and Roy Goodson. *Dezinformatsia: Active Measures in Soviet Strategy*. (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1984).

Shenon, Philip Shenon, "Years of Jamming Voice of America Halted by Soviet," *New York Times*, 26 May 1987.

Sindelar, Daisy. "The Kremlin's Troll Army: Moscow Is Financing Legions of Pro-Russia Internet Commenters. But How Much Do They Matter?" *The Atlantic*, 12 August 2014 <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/the-kremlins-troll-army/375932/>, accessed 1 April 2016.

Snegovaya, Maria. "Putin's Information War in Ukraine: The Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare." *Institute for the Study of War, Russia Report 1*, September 2015.

"State-Run News Station Accused of Making up Child Crucifixion," *Moscow Times*, 14 July 2014. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/state-run-news-station-accused-of-making-up-child-crucifixion/503397.html>, accessed 5 April 2016

Thomas, Timothy. "Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military." *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 17, 237-256.

United States Department of State. *Soviet Influence Activities: A Report on Active Measures and Propaganda, 1986-87*. (Washington: US State Department, 1987).

Policy briefs are published by the
Institute for European Studies

Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence
at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel

www.ies.be

Pleinlaan 5

B-1050 Brussels

T +32 2 614 80 01

ies@vub.ac.be