

The Soviet Roots of Meddling in U.S. Politics

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The release on January 6 of an [unclassified version](#) of the U.S. Intelligence Community's report describing efforts by Russian security services to influence last year's U.S. presidential campaign in favor of Donald Trump evoked a sense of déjà vu. Despite the advent of cyberwarfare, the Russian government's attempts to sway the U.S. election in 2016 were strikingly reminiscent of Soviet "active measures" during the Cold War.

The Intelligence Community report says that Russia's use of cyberwarfare and other tactics in 2016 was "the most recent expression of Moscow's longstanding desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order." This is undoubtedly true, but the report goes on to claim that "these activities demonstrated a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations." This sweeping characterization is toned down later in the report, but only slightly. The notion that Russian intelligence services' actions in 2016 were unprecedented in scale reflects an inadequate understanding of the historical context.

The reality is that the two main Soviet intelligence and security agencies—the KGB and GRU (military intelligence)—kept up a vigorous campaign for several decades to meddle in U.S. politics and discredit the United States. The "active measures" used by the KGB and GRU during the Cold War, including disinformation, forgeries of documents and letters, and the spread of propaganda through sympathetic individuals and front organizations, were remarkably similar to the tactics and goals of Russian intelligence agencies in 2016. Even though the World Wide Web and email did not exist during the Cold War, the basic methods used by the KGB and GRU in 2016 were simply adapted for the cyber age.

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The KGB's "Service A" and How We Know about It

The KGB's First Main Directorate (the foreign intelligence directorate) included a special unit known as Service A, which orchestrated a wide range of mostly non-violent but occasionally violent measures to destabilize the United States and undermine U.S. influence in the world. Service A was formed in the 1950s, and it almost immediately set to work spreading disinformation, producing forgeries, transmitting propaganda, and disrupting U.S. and Western public diplomacy.

The large cache of transcribed KGB documents in the Mitrokhin Collection that became accessible in July 2014 at Cambridge University's [Churchill Archives Centre](#)—excerpts of which had earlier been published in two books co-authored by the former KGB archivist Vasili Mitrokhin and the British historian Christopher Andrew—provides detailed evidence of Service A's activities. Other evidence comes from declassified KGB and GRU documents stored in Moscow at the [Russian State Archive of Recent History](#) and the [State Archive of the Russian Federation](#), and from recent memoirs by former KGB officers and Soviet officials.

How the Soviet Union Meddled in U.S. Politics

Among Service A's early operations was an effort to spread disinformation that supposedly linked the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to President John F. Kennedy's assassination. The KGB funded the publication of conspiracy-mongering books by Western authors and forged documents and letters that tied the assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, to the CIA and FBI. The Mitrokhin files indicate that Service A also surreptitiously provided funding to the American lawyer Mark Lane, whose scurrilous books about the Kennedy assassination, starting with *Rush to Judgment* in 1966, became a staple among conspiracy theorists. Even though Lane was probably unaware that financial support for his "research" was coming from the KGB, his work was warmly endorsed by the Soviet press. Lane's writings about the assassination have been thoroughly debunked and discredited, but they are still cited in some quarters to this day.

On other issues as well, disinformation and forgeries spread by Service A are still accepted by a surprisingly large number of people in the West. The KGB, working with the notorious East German State Security Ministry, widely disseminated the falsehood that the AIDS epidemic was started by U.S. government experiments at the Fort Detrick biological warfare defense laboratory in Maryland. Service A worked with the Cuban intelligence service to provide both real and forged CIA documents to Philip Agee, a renegade former CIA officer, who published the materials in books and newsletters as evidence of CIA "crimes."

Service A interfered more directly in U.S. politics when it sought to discredit high-ranking U.S. officials such as Lyndon Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover and prominent individuals outside the government, notably Martin Luther King. Service A disseminated forged documents supposedly showing links between Hoover and the far-right John Birch Society and Ku Klux Klan and tying Hoover to various illegal actions. To be sure, the FBI under Hoover did engage in some illegal operations, but the allegations promoted by the KGB were either false or wildly exaggerated.

On a more sinister note, Service A forged homophobic letters to the editor of U.S. newspapers claiming that Hoover was a gay transvestite who was seeking to establish a “network of like-minded homosexuals” within the FBI. These baseless allegations continue to enjoy credence in some circles in the United States even now.

Martin Luther King came under attack from the KGB in part because he declined to embrace a Communist agenda for the civil rights movement (even though one of his chief associates, Stanley Levison, was a Communist) and in part because his hard-won achievements threatened one of Service A’s main selling points. The entrenchment of racial segregation and racial discrimination in the United States during the first two decades of the Cold War had been a severe burden on U.S. foreign policy, belying the U.S. government’s claims to be promoting democracy and human rights. It was for this reason that many U.S. State Department officials came to support the civil rights movement, sensing that an end to segregation would improve America’s image abroad.

For the KGB, the calculus was the opposite. Soviet propaganda had long highlighted the iniquities of racial discrimination in the United States, and Soviet officials were well aware of the potency of this issue in tarnishing U.S. leadership in the world. Congressional passage of civil rights legislation, the KGB feared, would eliminate one of the Soviet Union’s major lines of attack. Officials in Service A became increasingly worried about the success of King and the civil rights movement and set out to discredit them. KGB officials used forgeries to depict King and other civil rights activists as “Uncle Toms” who were secretly colluding with the government. Service A also fabricated documents and spread disinformation that President Johnson had taken secret steps with King’s implicit approval to ensure the continued subordination of blacks.

In later years, the KGB tried to stir up racial tensions in New York City by sending inflammatory forged publications to black activist groups and by setting off a bomb in a “Negro section of New York” and blaming it on the militant Jewish Defense League. Service A resorted to similar provocations throughout the 1970s and well into the 1980s, viewing race relations as the issue most likely to destabilize the U.S. political system and divide American society.

Soviet Efforts to Influence U.S. Presidential Elections

In at least two cases, the Soviet Union secretly tried to influence U.S. presidential elections. In 1968, the Soviet Politburo strongly favored the Democratic candidate, Hubert Humphrey, out of fear that the Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, who had been known as a vehement anti-Communist in the 1950s, would take a harsh stance against the Soviet Union. Soviet leaders ordered their ambassador in Washington, DC, Anatoly Dobrynin, to approach Humphrey with an offer of clandestine funding for his campaign. When Dobrynin raised the matter with Humphrey, the latter immediately turned it down. Nixon ended up winning, but instead of confronting the Soviet Union, he embarked on a broad *détente*, much to Moscow's relief. Soviet officials heartily welcomed Nixon's reelection in 1972 and were dismayed when he was forced to resign in 1974.

In 1976, the Soviet Union again secretly adopted measures to influence a U.S. presidential election. Early in the year, the KGB warned the Soviet Politburo that Senator Henry ("Scoop") Jackson, known for his fierce opposition to the Soviet Union, stood a good chance of gaining the Democratic nomination. Jackson's victories in the Massachusetts and New York primary elections heightened these concerns. Service A prepared a wide-ranging set of measures to discredit Jackson, especially by falsely portraying him as a homosexual. The KGB sent forged FBI letters to leading U.S. newspapers and journalists claiming that Jackson was a closeted gay. Even after Jackson's campaign faltered and he dropped out of the 1976 race, Service A kept up its homophobic war of disinformation against him, hoping to prevent him from ever again becoming a viable presidential candidate.

In 1983, amid severe tensions in U.S.-Soviet relations, the KGB proposed measures to try to undermine Ronald Reagan's position in the 1984 U.S. election. But the proposal never got very far because the prolonged illness and eventual death of the Soviet leader Yuri Andropov meant that a wide range of steps were put on hold. Moreover, by 1984 the cables coming in from Ambassador Dobrynin left little doubt that Reagan was going to win in a landslide no matter what the Soviet Union did—a prediction that was amply borne out.

Russian Meddling Today: New Technology, Same Activity

Service A's active measures to influence U.S. politics and undermine the role of the United States in the world persisted until the final years of the Soviet regime. As late as 1991, KGB-inspired disinformation and forgeries continued to circulate. Throughout this time, the chief aim of the KGB and GRU was to "undermine the US-led liberal democratic order," the same goal that is now being attributed to the Russian intelligence services.

After the Soviet Union disintegrated, Moscow's active measures against the United States abated, but only for a while. The basic problem was that neither the KGB nor the GRU was ever dissolved. The KGB's main components were simply renamed, eventually becoming known as the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). The GRU was not even renamed. Instead, it continued to function intact under its Soviet name.

After Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer who is immensely proud of the sixteen years he worked for the agency, replaced Boris Yeltsin as Russian president at the end of 1999, the FSB, SVR, and GRU gradually revived the intensity of their active measures against the United States and its allies. Over the past five years, as Putin has increased his anti-Western hostility and xenophobic nationalism, Russian intelligence services have taken the opportunity to return to a Cold War-era scale of actions to interfere in U.S. politics and undermine U.S. global influence. Technology has changed, but little else has. Anyone who wants to understand the Putin administration's attempts to influence the U.S. presidential election in 2016 should closely study what the KGB did over and over during the Cold War.

The success of the United States in withstanding the KGB's "active measures" and emerging as the world's preeminent power after the Soviet Union disintegrated was attained only by vigilance and a determination to safeguard democratic values and procedures. Much the same will be needed nowadays to ward off the challenge from the Russian intelligence services. All previous U.S. presidents took the issue seriously and pursued appropriate countermeasures, and one hopes that the same will be true of Donald Trump.