

# Building a nation on lies: How Bolshevik tactics shape modern Russia

While history does not literally repeat itself, it 'rhymes,' say historians.

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A red 'Victory' installation is shown in Ivanteyevka, Moscow province, on May 7. [AFP]

By [Olha Chepil](#) | 2025-06-13

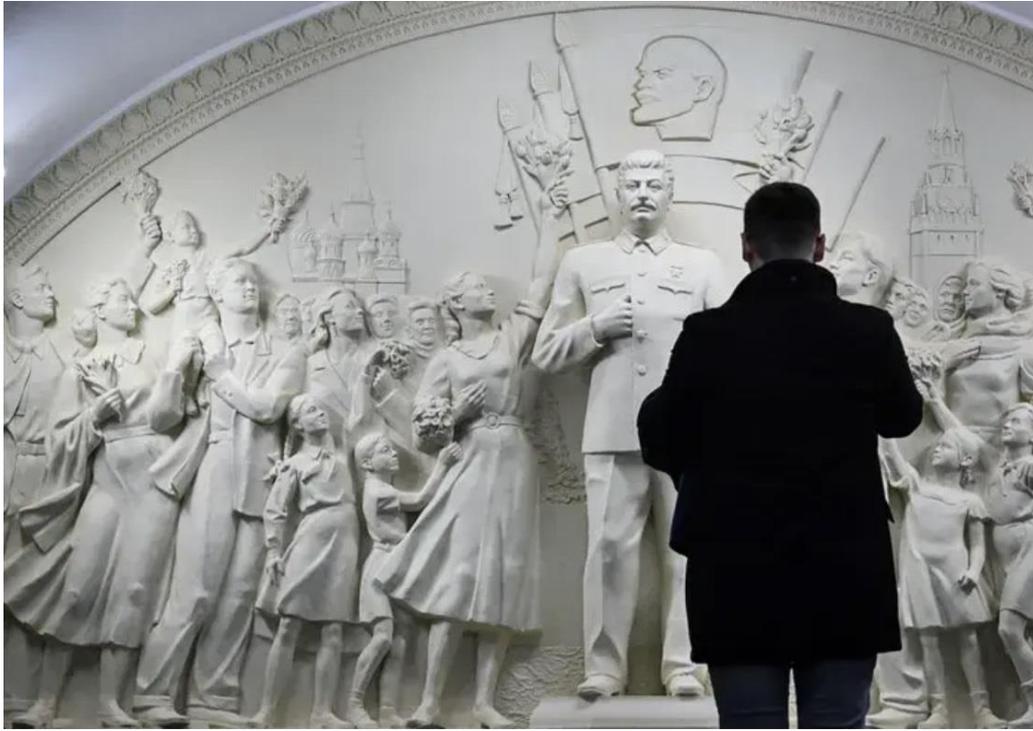
KYIV -- A century ago, Vladimir Lenin used trains to spread revolution in Russia. Today, the Kremlin uses Telegram.

Historians say the tactics are the same; only the tools have changed. The message still moves fast, targets the masses and aims to control what they hear and believe. History does not repeat, they say, but it "rhymes."

Modern Russia has digitized Lenin's playbook. Party newspapers have become embedded "war correspondents." Joseph Stalin's cult has become a

cult of war. And instead of posters and loudspeakers, propaganda now spreads by algorithm -- targeted, relentless and inescapable.

In the present day, every person residing in the country receives his or "propaganda at home" -- personalized, intrusive and impossible to dodge, said Andrey Tarasov, a historian at Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University.



*A commuter pauses by a newly unveiled Stalin bas-relief at Moscow's Taganskaya subway station on May 15, part of ongoing efforts to rehabilitate the dictator and recast Soviet history in patriotic terms. [Alexander Nemenov/AFP]*



*School No. 2 in Nizhny Odes, Komi Republic, Russia, honors the late Sergei Timofeyev, killed in Avdiivka, Ukraine, in a photo posted December 11 on social media. [VKontakte]*

"The classic techniques remain. Only the forms and tools have changed," he told Kontur.

### **1917: the birth of the total lie**

When Lenin and the Bolsheviks took power, they used bullets for enemies -- and newspapers for everyone else. One of their first moves was to ban the independent press and establish a state monopoly on "truth."

"As early as November 9, 1917, Lenin personally wrote the tenets: more lies, more distortions, more 'truths that are actually lies,'" said **Pavlo Hai-Nyzhnyk**, a historian and senior researcher at Ukraine's National Academy of Sciences.

This statement marked the start of Soviet propaganda -- a systematic effort to rewrite reality and build an alternate universe, according to Hai-Nyzhnyk.

"'Land to the peasants; factories to the workers,' 'Peace to [all] peoples' are deceptive slogans. The public believed and perceived it as its personal achievement, without asking the question: 'How exactly will this be implemented?'" he told Kontur.

A propaganda campaign began, the first in history at that scale.

Newspapers, leaflets, posters and propaganda trains with lecturers and acting troupes were key to early Soviet messaging. *Pravda* and *Izvestia* served as the main outlets, printing only party-approved content.

"In the absence of an alternative, a person with a newspaper is now an agitator. It was a weapon of mass destruction," said Tarasov.

Historians say Lenin aimed not to inform the masses but to shape them. In *What Is To Be Done?*, he argued the party should act as a "vanguard," bringing "correct consciousness" to those unaware of their own needs.

"Lenin cleansed the earth of 'evil spirits' -- it sounded almost religious. This is how the myth of the regime's 'sacred mission' was created. Today, it's the same thing: The Kremlin is allegedly waging a 'battle against Satanism,' 'sin' and 'the West,'" said Hai-Nyzhnyk.

The modern propaganda trains are Telegram channels, YouTube and pro-Kremlin "war correspondents." The ideas are the same but on digital media.

"It's 100% certain that this mechanism is operating again. Now the internet and modern technologies have been added to it," said Tarasov.

### **From Lunacharsky to TikTok**

The Bolsheviks were early to recognize cinema as a tool of mass persuasion. When Lenin called film "the most important of the arts," he meant its propaganda power, said Hai-Nyzhnyk.

Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first people's commissar of education, led the cultural propaganda effort, saying that artistic messaging, not blunt slogans, was key to shaping public consciousness.

"Whatever film was being made, whether about the life of peasants or about love, the necessary 'drop' that needed to be implanted in the public made its way in," said Hai-Nyzhnyk.

This approach gave rise to the film *Battleship Potemkin*, live performances for giant crowds and a new visual language built on symbolism and suggestion.

Historians say the Kremlin still follows the same propaganda logic: President Vladimir Putin is the nation's protector, enemies are caricatured as traitors and Russians are shown as a unified people under siege.

"All dictatorial or autocratic regimes always use the thesis that 'Everyone has betrayed us, we are surrounded by enemies and they will not allow us to make peace,'" said Hai-Nyzhnyk.

"And that is why, in order to make peace, we have to kill everyone."

After Lenin's death, Stalin tightened control and expanded propaganda into an all-encompassing force.

The cult of personality took hold: it glorified Stalin as the "father of nations," an omniscient genius. His image filled schools, factories and apartments.

Bolshevism replaced religion: stars for crosses, Stalin for God, and Pioneers (a nationwide youth-indoctrination organization) for Sunday schools, said Tarasov.

"If we look at Stalin and Putin's core interests, we see that they are very similar in many ways," Dmitry Gainetdinov, deputy director general of scholarly work at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, told Kontur.

"They are guided by the same geopolitical guidelines: Russian imperialism, [Russia as a] great power."

Stalinist propaganda created a sense of constant threat, a logic that still drives Putin's regime today, historians say.

### **The cult of victory, eternal mobilization**

World War II laid the groundwork for a new national myth: the Great Patriotic War. Since 1945, historians say, the Soviet victory has been framed as sacred, highlighting heroism while ignoring the human cost.

Hero propaganda boosted morale and enabled mobilization, a strategy now revived in Russia's war on Ukraine, with new "heroes" and field newspapers (for soldiers on faraway fronts), Gainetdinov said.

"Our museum has a modern-day Russian army *Red Star* newspaper where everything is copied directly from a 1943 issue of the *Red Star*," said Gainetdinov.

"A big headline on the front page says, 'Their courage will live on for centuries' and so on. ... [M]odern Russia has not come up with anything new."

### **Totalitarianism upgrade: digital lies**

Today's propaganda has evolved, becoming faster, more immersive and harder to escape.

School curricula, patriotic films, state-approved history textbooks and even TikTok videos now serve a single goal: to eliminate alternative viewpoints.

"Censorship is now digital. Bots, trolls, deepfake videos, 'frontline magazines' -- everything is working in tandem," said Tarasov.

The tools have changed over the past century, but the mission remains the same, according to him. Modern propaganda is powered by Telegram channels, bot networks, artificial intelligence [AI]-generated content and youth-oriented social media campaigns.

"Russia is using AI and social networks to undermine trust in elections, democracy and truth as such," Tarasov said.

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